

**Multinational Corporations in Violent Conflict:
*A Case Study of Firestone in Liberia***

by

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Contents

<i>Acknowledgements</i>	3
<i>Abstract</i>	6
<i>List of acronyms</i>	7
<i>List of figures</i>	8
CHAPTER ONE	9
1. <i>Introduction</i>	9
1.1. Problem Statement	10
2. <i>Research Questions</i>	13
3. <i>The Case Study</i>	13
3.1. Firestone's Corporate History and Structure	13
3.2. Firestone and the First Liberian Civil War	16
4. <i>Significance of the Study</i>	17
5. <i>Research Design</i>	19
6. <i>Research Methodology</i>	19
7. <i>Limitations and Delimitations</i>	20
8. <i>Chapter Outline</i>	20
9. <i>Key Terms</i>	21
CHAPTER TWO	23
<i>Section 1 The Broader Academic Landscape</i>	23
<i>Section 2 The Structure of the Existing Literature</i>	25
2.1. The Emergence of Public and Academic Interest	25
2.2. The Evidence and Methods Used	26
<i>Section 3 Prominent Themes in the Literature</i>	27
3.1. Identification of Different Private Business Actors	27
3.2. Rebel-centric Approaches	28
3.3. Focus on the Natural Resource Sector	29
3.4. Recognition of the Risks of Operating in a Conflict	30
3.5. Corporate Activities and their Impacts on the Conflict	31
3.6. Business Actors as Peace Actors	34
3.7. Section Summary	34
<i>Section 4 The Literature on the Firestone Liberia Case Study</i>	35
4.1. The Liberian Civil War Economy	35
4.2. Firestone and the Liberian Civil War	38
<i>Section 5 Chapter Summary</i>	39
CHAPTER THREE	41
<i>Section 1 Factors to the First Liberian Civil War</i>	41
1.1. The Historical Context	41
1.2. The Doe Dictatorship	46
1.3. The Influence of International and Regional Factors	50
1.4. Section Summary	52
<i>Section 2 Firestone and the Liberian State</i>	54
2.1. The Historical Context	54
2.2. The Origins of Firestone's Liberian Operations	55
2.3. The Concession Agreement	56
2.4. Section Summary	59

<i>Section 3 / Firestone and The Bridgestone Corporation</i>	60
3.1. The Bridgestone Corporation Acquisition	60
3.2. The Creation of Bridgestone/Firestone Incorporated	61
3.3. Section Summary	63
<i>Section 4 / Chapter Summary</i>	64
CHAPTER FOUR	65
<i>Section 1 / Firestone and the Conflict Trajectory</i>	65
1.1. December 1989 – May 1990	65
1.2. The Events of June 1990	69
1.3. July 1990 – December 1991	71
1.4. January 1992 – November 1992	77
1.5. December 1992 – July 1997	83
<i>Section 2 / Analysis of the Case Study</i>	85
2.1. The Consequences of Firestone's Actions	85
2.2. The Possible Motivation for Firestone's Actions	88
<i>Section 3 / Chapter Summary</i>	91
CHAPTER FIVE	93
5.1. Concluding Remarks	93
5.2. Future Research	95
BIBLIOGRAPHY	97
APPENDICES	111

Abstract

The First Liberian Civil War began with an insurgency led by Charles Taylor on Christmas Eve in 1989. At the time, the company Firestone Liberia (one of many of the subsidiaries of the multinational, Bridgestone Corporation) had been operating the world's largest rubber plantation in Liberia's Margibi County for over six decades. Over the course of three years, Firestone engaged with various actors in the Liberian conflict theatre in order to continue operating its rubber plantation. The most notable of these actors was the warlord, Charles Taylor, a relationship for which Firestone Liberia has received much criticism. This case study is situated within the broader debate on the role of multinational corporations in host countries that descend into conflict. The existing literature on the topic exposes a potentially ambivalent role for private actors as either catalysts for aggravating conflict dynamics or promoters of peace within conflict zones. This research contends that insufficient attention has been paid to understanding the minutiae of corporate behaviour in contemporary conflict and that more in-depth low-n case studies are required before prescribing a positive role for companies in conflict zones. The findings of this paper reveal the importance of accounting for variables, such as conflict characteristics and geo-economic and geo-political conditions, and how these limit the agency of private actors in situations of violent conflict.

List of acronyms

AFL	Armed Forces of Liberia
BFS	Bridgestone/Firestone, Incorporated
BP	British Petroleum
DLH	Dalhoff Larsen & Horneman
DRC	Democratic Republic of the Congo
ECOMOG	Economic Community of West African States Monitoring Group
ECOWAS	Economic Community of West African States
FCA	Finance Corporation of America
FDI	foreign direct investment
FPCO	Firestone Plantations Company
FSNR	Firestone Natural Rubber Company
FSTR	Firestone Tire and Rubber Company
ICC	International Criminal Court
IGNU	Interim Government of National Unity
IO	international organisation
INPFL	Independent National Patriotic Front of Liberia
LFF	Liberian Frontier Force
MNC	multinational corporation
MOU	memorandum of understanding
MOD	memorandum of discussion
NGO	non-governmental organisation
NIMCO	Nimba Mining Company
NPFL	National Patriotic Front of Liberia
NPRAG	National Patriotic Reconstruction Assembly Government
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
PRC	People's Redemption Council
RIA	Roberts International Airport
RUF	Revolutionary United Front
TRC	Truth and Reconciliation Commission
UN	United Nations
UNCTAD	United Nations Conference on Trade and Development
UNGPs	United Nations Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights
UNOMIL	United Nations Observer Mission in Liberia
ULIMO	United Liberation Movement of Liberia for Democracy
UNSC	United Nations Security Council
URM	United Rubber Workers
VPs	Voluntary Principles on Security and Human Rights

List of figures

<i>Figure 1: Bridgestone Group organogram</i>	15
<i>Figure 2: Political map of Liberia, showing the location of the Firestone plantation</i>	66
<i>Figure 3: Firestone's Harbel plantation</i>	68

CHAPTER ONE

1. Introduction

On Christmas Eve in 1989, a conflict broke out in the small West African state of Liberia. It began with an insurgency launched from neighbouring Sierra Leone and quickly escalated into a violent and protracted war fought along ethnic lines. The Liberian Civil War was a “peculiarly horrible”¹ conflict, characterised by mass atrocities committed by all warring factions (including state and nonstate actors).² At the time, Firestone Liberia (a subsidiary of Bridgestone/Firestone, Incorporated (BFS)) had been operating the world’s largest rubber plantation in Liberia’s Margibi County for over six decades. As the situation in Liberia destabilised and violence became widespread, Firestone Liberia (or simply, Firestone) was faced with two decisions. The first was whether to withdraw from Liberia and cease operations or to keep the plantation operating in spite of the surrounding chaos. While its expatriate staff were evacuated in June 1990 following a series of incidents on the plantation, the company later made the decision to return to Liberia with the encouragement of its parent company, BFS. In so doing, Firestone was forced to make a second decision regarding which actors in the conflict it would engage with to facilitate the process of restarting operations. Although not much was known of Firestone Liberia’s strategy at the time, these decisions have since earned the company considerable criticism.

While conflict can attract commercial actors who see war as a lucrative business opportunity, many legitimate companies with established operations also elect to continue their commercial activities within a host country despite the instability wrought by conflict.³ In particular, companies whose operations involve immobile natural resources and who have made substantial capital investments in their host country often choose to “weather the ensuing challenges by ‘working around’ the conflict”.⁴ Thus, in times of conflict, legitimate companies like Firestone often find their pre-existing and licit operations engulfed by the surrounding violence and chaos, forcing

¹ Stephen Ellis, “Liberia 1989–1994: A Study of Ethnic and Spiritual Violence,” *African Affairs*, vol. 94, no. 375 (1995), <https://www.jstor.org/stable/723778>.

² T. Christian Miller and Jonathan Jones, “Chapter Three: Tough Talk in the Jungle,” in *Firestone and the Warlord*, November 18, 2014, accessed September 16, 2018, <https://www.propublica.org/article/firestone-and-the-warlord-chapter-3>.

³ Karen Ballantine and Heiko Nitzschke, “Business and Armed Conflict: An Assessment of Issues and Options,” *Die Friedens-Warte*, vol. 79, no. 1/2 (2004): 39, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/23773715.pdf>.

⁴ Ballantine and Nitzschke, “Business and Armed Conflict,” 40.

them to adopt strategies that they might not necessarily condone.⁵ These strategies can have dire consequences on conflict dynamics by, for example, affecting the balance of power among actors and hampering prospects for a peaceful resolution of the conflict. In the case of Firestone Liberia, there is broad consensus that the company's decision to return to Liberia and enter into a formal arrangement with Charles Taylor provided him with the necessary revenue and logistical support to withstand pressure from the Economic Community of West African States Monitoring Group (ECOMOG). As such, it is argued that Firestone's strategy "indirectly and perhaps directly contributed to mass death and destruction in Liberia, and prolonged the civil war by providing Taylor with badly needed revenue and a base of operations".⁶

This reproach of Firestone's behaviour forms part of a broader debate about the role of multinational corporations (MNCs) and their subsidiaries in aggravating conflict dynamics. However, this research contends that insufficient attention has been paid to understanding the minutiae of corporate behaviour in contemporary conflict. Through the use of the case study of Firestone Liberia this paper seeks to reveal the importance of accounting for certain variables, such as conflict characteristics and geo-economic and geo-political conditions, to show how these limit the agency of private actors in situations of violent conflict.

1.1. Problem Statement

The developing world has been an attractive site for MNC expansion for a number of reasons, including (but not limited to) the possibility of generous tax concessions, untapped market potential, low labour costs and relatively low costs of factors of production.⁷ Another key factor that has drawn significant global foreign direct investment (FDI) to the developing world is the presence of strategic natural resources. However, many of the sites of these critical resources are located in states that are

⁵ Ballantine and Nitzschke, "Business and Armed Conflict"; Mats Berdal and David M. Malone, introduction to *Greed and Grievance: Economic Agendas in Civil Wars*, (Boulder, Colorado: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2000), 10.

⁶ United Steelworkers of America, "Preliminary Report: Bridgestone/Firestone's Role in the Liberian Civil War," September 1996, accessed August 12, 2017, <https://www.propublica.org/documents/item/1684557-1996-09-25-bfs-preliminaryreportonliberia-usw.html>.

⁷ Ayo Whetho, "Natural Resources, Profit and Peace: Multinational Corporations and Conflict Transformation in the Democratic Republic of Congo," (PhD dissertation, University of Kwazulu-Natal, registration number 205518423, 2014), 3, http://researchspace.ukzn.ac.za/xmlui/bitstream/handle/10413/11687/Whetho_Ayo_2014.pdf;sequence=1.

emerging from, engaged in or on the brink of violent conflict. With the disappearance of superpower financing in the post-Cold War period, combatants have had to seek out alternate sources of revenue to sustain their military campaigns. In Africa, in particular, natural resources have become a particularly significant source of combatant revenue during conflict.⁸ This has facilitated the rise of “war economies”, the term used to refer to “the exploitative reliance of warring factions on the economic production of territories they control”.⁹ This has heightened the visibility of resource-reliant MNCs in contemporary conflicts and led to the development of a discussion around the potential impact of corporate activities on the intensity and duration of contemporary conflicts.

The debate reached a new height at the turn of the millennium, as awareness was brought to the many high-profile MNCs operating in war-torn African states.¹⁰ In 2001, an investigation into the relationship between business and the illegal exploitation of resources in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) was launched by a United Nations (UN) panel. The final report concluded that:

The role of the private sector in the exploitation of natural resources and the continuation of the war has been vital. A number of companies have been involved and have fuelled the war directly, trading arms for natural resources. Others have facilitated access to financial resources, which are used to purchase weapons.¹¹

This declaration was ground-breaking in that it marked the first time that a UN investigation identified MNCs as being complicit in the perpetuation of conflict.¹² Since then, numerous high-profile MNCs have been “named and shamed” for their perceived roles in certain conflicts. This is reinforced by burgeoning academic research that provides evidence that the role of corporate actors can be a decisive intervening factor in influencing the intensity and duration of a conflict. This has been accompanied by a call for companies to become positive intervening forces in the conflicts in which they find themselves embedded. As such, the existing literature exposes a potentially

⁸ Ballantine and Nitzschke, “Business and Armed Conflict,” 36.

⁹ Philippa Atkinson, “The War Economy in Liberia: A Political Analysis,” *Relief and Rehabilitation Network Paper*, no. 22 (May 1997), 6, https://www.humanitarianlibrary.org/sites/default/files/2014/02/ODI_rrn22_TheWarEconomyInLiberia.pdf.

¹⁰ Mark van Dorp, *Multinational Corporations and Conflict: International Principles and Guidelines for Corporate Responsibility in Conflict-affected Areas* (Amsterdam: Stichting Onderzoek Multinationale Ondernemingen (SOMO), 2014), 21.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Ibid.*

ambivalent role for private actors as either catalysts for aggravating conflict dynamics or promoters of peace within conflict zones.¹³

However, this paper seeks to show that the relationship between business actors and conflict dynamics is not unidirectional nor is it static in nature. Changes in the dynamics of a conflict affect the risks posed to companies and influence the strategies they adopt.¹⁴ Moreover, high levels of violence and brutality create an environment of fear and intimidation and can severely limit the choices available to foreign business actors in a conflict environment. This is not to say that the issue should be approached with sympathy – as many MNCs’ public relations representatives would prefer – but that there is a layer of truth that warrants attention.

In addition to the dynamism of the relationship that governs the corporate–conflict nexus, other variables, such as the sector or industry of the MNC, impact the strategies adopted by a company on the ground.¹⁵ Of particular relevance to this analysis are those geo-political and geo-economic factors that characterise the site(s) of a MNC’s operations in the host country. The availability of valuable resources and strategic access to important conflict zones and infrastructure make the sites of certain MNCs attractive to combatants. However, the presence of armed actors at the site of its operations places a significant constraint on the choices available to a company that seeks to continue operating. In spite of this, there is little recognition of the role played by such intervening factors in determining MNC behaviour in conflict zones. This paper asserts that the strategies adopted by companies in conflict zones are influenced by “a dynamic constellation of independent variables”¹⁶ that need to be accounted for in order to rectify existing simplistic notions of foreign business actors as purely profit-seeking entities.

In light of this, this study analyses Firestone Liberia’s behaviour during the First Liberian Civil War to reveal the complex reality of corporate behaviour in conflict zones.

¹³ Whetho, “Natural Resources, Profit and Peace,” 8.

¹⁴ Ibid;

Jonathan Berman, “Boardrooms and Bombs,” *The Harvard International Review*, May 6, 2006, accessed January 10, 2018, <http://hir.harvard.edu/article/?a=853>.

¹⁵ Berman, “Boardrooms and Bombs.”

¹⁶ Luke Anthony Patey, *A Complex Reality: The Strategic Behaviour of Multinational Oil Corporations and the New Wars in Sudan* (Copenhagen: Danish Institute for International Studies, 2006), 51.

2. Research Questions

2.1. The primary research question for this study is: *What are the possible reasons for Firestone's behaviour during the First Liberian Civil War?*

2.1.1. How did Firestone's behaviour evolve over the conflict trajectory?

2.1.2. Where did ultimate decision-making authority lie for Firestone and how did this affect the company's decisions?

2.2. The secondary research question is: *What are the consequences of these findings for monitoring the role of corporate actors in conflict zones?*

3. The Case Study

This paper employs Firestone Liberia during the First Liberian Civil War as a case study to investigate the intricacies of the corporate–conflict nexus. The period between June 1990 and November 1992 is emphasised, as this was when the company was most actively engaged with certain actors in the conflict theatre.

3.1. Firestone's Corporate History and Structure

Multinational corporations typically have complex and convoluted organisational structures. The corporate structure within which Firestone Liberia is situated is similarly complicated. As such, the hierarchy needs to be broken down at each level to better understand any corporate constraints on Firestone Liberia's behaviour during the First Liberian Civil War.

Harvey Samuel Firestone Sr founded the Firestone Tire and Rubber Company (FSTR) in 1900 in Akron, Ohio.¹⁷ In 1923, the company expanded its operations overseas when it entered into an agreement with the Liberian government to establish a rubber plantation in Margibi County.¹⁸ The Firestone Natural Rubber Company (FSNR) was established in 1926 as a subsidiary of FSTR and was charged with controlling the plantation from its headquarters in North America, while its own subsidiary, the

¹⁷ Stephen L. Harp, *A World History of Rubber: Empire, Industry, and the Everyday* (Chichester: John Wiley and Sons, 2016), 97.

¹⁸ Bridgestone Americas, Inc., "Corporation: History," accessed March 7, 2018, <https://www.bridgestoneamericas.com/en/corporation/history>.

Firestone Plantations Company (FPCO), executed operations on the ground.¹⁹ Over the subsequent decades, the plantation grew to become the largest contiguous rubber plantation in the world and a key source of employment and revenue for the Liberian state.²⁰ Its parent company, FSTR, continued to expand its operations and diversify its product offerings in the North American market.²¹ By 1975, FSTR had expanded to become a multi-billion dollar company with operations around the world.²²

In 1988, FSTR was sold to the Japanese conglomerate, the Bridgestone Corporation (“Bridgestone”).²³ Bridgestone acquired full ownership of FSTR and merged its North American operations to form Bridgestone/Firestone, Incorporated (now Bridgestone Americas, Incorporated). FSNR continued to operate as a subsidiary of BFS as a division within Bridgestone/Firestone Diversified Products (now Firestone Diversified Products). FPCO remained the company in charge of the Harbel plantation, but was later renamed Firestone Liberia (“Firestone”).^{24 25} Due to the complexity of the current structure, a simplified organogram follows.²⁶

¹⁹ Jessica Bergman, “The Alien Tort Statute and *Flomo v. Firestone Natural Rubber Company*: The Key to Change in Global Child Labor Practices?” *Indiana Journal of Legal Studies*, vol. 18, no. 1 (Winter 2011), <http://www.repository.law.indiana.edu/ijgls/vol18/iss1/18457>.

²⁰ United Steelworkers of America, “Preliminary Report,” 3.

²¹ Bridgestone Americas, Inc., “Corporation: History.”

²² Firestone, “1960s – 1980s: Strength and Influence,” accessed March 6, 2018, <https://www.firestonetire.com/heritage#1960-1980s>.

²³ Jim Mackinnon, “Bridgestone’s Buy of Firestone, 20 Years Later,” *Akron Beacon Journal*, May 4, 2008, accessed October 11, 2017, <https://www.ohio.com/akron/business/bridgestone-s-buy-of-firestone-20-years-later>.

²⁴ Bergman, “The Alien Tort Statute.”

²⁵ However, the name FPCO is at times used in the primary sources referenced in this study.

²⁶ Bergman, “The Alien Tort Statute”;

Nicholas Cook, “Liberia’s Post-War Recovery: Key Issues and Developments,” in *Politics and Economics of Africa, Volume 6*, ed. by Olufemi Wusu (New York: Nova Science Publishers, Inc., 2006);

Bridgestone Americas, Inc., “Corporation: Subsidiaries and Business Units,” accessed March 2, 2018, <https://www.bridgestoneamericas.com/en/corporation/subsidiaries-and-business-units>;

Firestone Natural Rubber Company, “Home,” accessed January 8, 2018, <https://www.firestonenaturalrubber.com>;

Bridgestone Americas, Inc., “Corporation: History.”

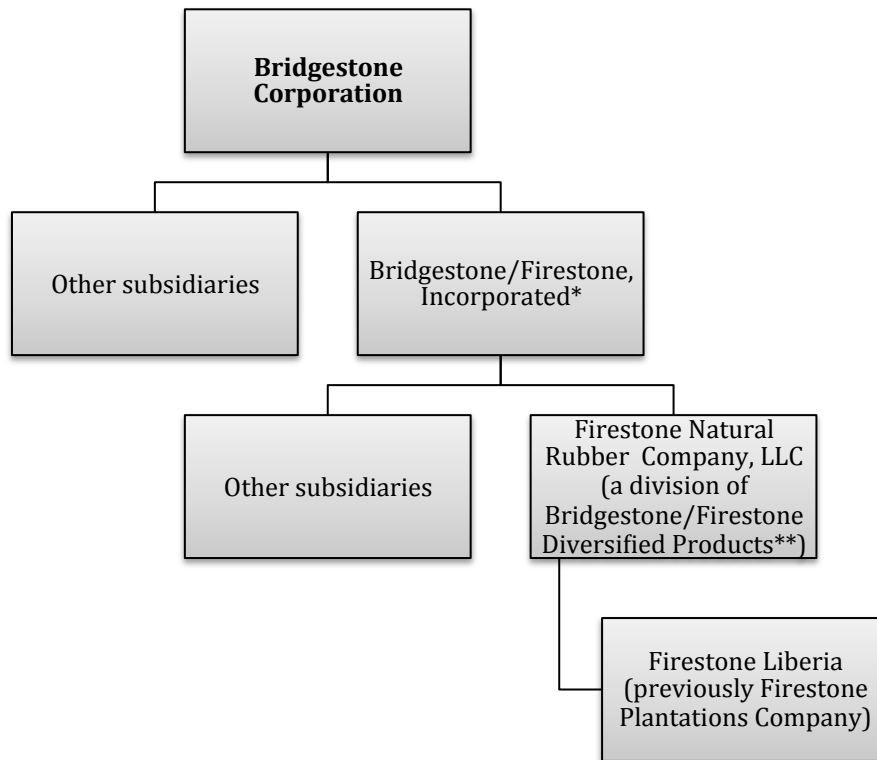


Figure 1: Bridgestone Group organogram²⁷

Following Bridgestone's acquisition of FSTR, there was a significant disjuncture between the parent company in Tokyo and its new subsidiary in North America. Communications from Bridgestone were sent in Japanese and few of the Japanese managers at BFS headquarters could speak fluent English, which alienated US management and made instituting changes on the ground in Akron challenging.²⁸ In a complex organisational structure like that of the Bridgestone Group, decisions pertaining to issues at the subsidiary level tend to be made at lower levels in the company structure. This is particularly the case when the parent company is otherwise involved in complex issues on the home front, as was the case at BFS headquarters at the time. As such, when the conflict neared the Firestone plantation in mid-1990, Firestone Liberia's management were the first to take charge of the situation on the ground. It was only once their efforts proved futile and the situation became one of life and death that BFS stepped in. The Bridgestone Corporation, Firestone's ultimate

²⁷ *Bridgestone/Firestone is now Bridgestone North American Tire, LLC;

**Bridgestone/Firestone Diversified Products, LLC is now Firestone Diversified Products, LLC.

²⁸ Adam L. Penenberg, *Blood Highways: The True Story Behind the Ford-Firestone Killing Machine* (Eugene, Oregon: Wayzgoose Press, 2012).

holding company, had little interference in or influence over the strategies adopted by its subsidiary on the ground.

3.2. Firestone and the First Liberian Civil War

As established, Firestone has a longstanding history with the Liberian state and has made substantial capital investments in the country through its plantation. When Liberia descended into civil war in the early 1990s, BFS spokesman, Trevor Hoskins, announced to the press in Akron that the intention was to keep operations running even with the presence of the rebels, whom he referred to as “freedom fighters”.²⁹ The plantation remained active until a battle between the National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL) rebels and the government’s Armed Forces of Liberia (AFL) destabilised operations and endangered employees in June 1990. This resulted in the evacuation of Firestone Liberia’s expatriate staff and the effective halting of operations. Firestone and BFS remained intent on restarting operations and sent a small team of managers back to Monrovia in 1991.³⁰ However, management experienced difficulties in accessing the plantation and in appeasing both the Liberian government and the rebels. Eventually, in January 1992, Firestone Liberia signed an agreement with the rebel leader, Charles Taylor, at the behest of the BFS Board of Directors, that committed the company to conducting its operations solely through National Patriotic Reconstruction Assembly Government (NPRAG) territory.

The details of Taylor’s relationship with Firestone were largely unknown until more recently, when a documentary entitled *Firestone and the Warlord* aired in late 2014. The documentary and the commentary it has inspired paint an unflattering picture of Firestone as a profit-driven entity whose agreement with Taylor negatively impacted conflict dynamics during the First Liberian Civil War. As such, the case study is situated within the broader debate that argues that “access to lucrative economic resources with the active participation of ... [MNCs] has played an important role in ... sustaining conflicts”.³¹ Analysis of the available evidence indicates that the 1992 agreement did have negative consequences for conflict dynamics in so far as it gave Taylor access to financial resources and provided him a military base from which to operate. However,

²⁹ United Steelworkers of America, “Preliminary Report,” 6.

³⁰ *Firestone and the Warlord*, directed by Marcela Gaviria, November 24, 2014 (Boston, Massachusetts: PBS Frontline), <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/film/firestone-and-the-warlord/>.

³¹ Pan Kanagaretnam and Susan Brown, *Business, Conflict, and Peacebuilding: An Operational Framework* (Canadian Peacekeeping Press for The Pearson Peacekeeping Centre, 2005), 1.

this study investigates the possible motivations for Firestone Liberia's decision to deal with Taylor in order to show the limited choices available to foreign business actors in conflict zones. In order to do so, intervening factors are analysed to ascertain the agency available to Firestone Liberia, as well as its parent company, BFS, in navigating the Liberian conflict.

4. Significance of the Study

The primary significance of this study is its contribution to the ongoing debate on the role of MNCs in contemporary conflicts. The existing literature tends to be superficial and focuses predominantly on the negative consequences of MNC strategies in conflict zones. While this is important, little effort has been made to investigate the agency available to foreign business actors in situations of extreme violence. Scant attention has been dedicated to investigating the evolution of Firestone's strategy in Liberia along the dynamic conflict trajectory, and even less to incorporating significant intervening variables to analyse why the company made a "deal with the devil".³² Some of these variables include Liberia's entrenched political culture of predation and selfishness, which is addressed in Chapter Three. Additionally, the impact of the characteristics of the Liberian Civil War, such as the shocking nature of the violence and the intensity of the brutality, are highlighted in Chapter Four. Moreover, the relevance of resources available on the plantation and its geographical position within the conflict are emphasised in Chapter Four to show how such factors can constrain the choices available to companies operating in conflict zones. Thus, the Firestone case study is used to investigate the corporate-conflict nexus more holistically and to unpack the intervening factors that might affect corporate decision-making in such situations.

Currently, numerous international initiatives, programmes and voluntary principles exist as guides for ensuring "good" corporate behaviour in conflict zones.³³ The United Nations Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights (UNGPs) and the Voluntary

³² T. Christian Miller and Jonathan Jones, "Chapter Four: Deal with the Devil," in *Firestone and the Warlord*, November 18, 2014, accessed September 16, 2018, <https://www.propublica.org/article/firestone-and-the-warlord-chapter-4>.

³³ United Nations, *Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights: Implementing the United Nations "Protect, Respect and Remedy" Framework*, UN Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner, 2011, accessed February 8, 2018, http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Publications/GuidingPrinciplesBusinessHR_EN.pdf; Secretariat for the Voluntary Principles on Security and Human Rights, "What are the Voluntary Principles?" Voluntary Principles on Security and Human Rights, accessed February 8, 2018, <http://www.voluntaryprinciples.org>.

Principles on Security and Human Rights (VPs) inform many of the other strategies devised for conflict-sensitive business practices.³⁴ However, these standards lack real operational guidance and numerous companies have noted that – even in low-risk areas – adhering to these standards is not a simple task. As Achim Wennmann elucidates, the problem here is that the standards are “declaratory rather than operational”.³⁵ This study asserts that more needs to be done to understand what drives legitimate companies to enter into arrangements with combatant forces in conflict zones, before prescribing a framework for positive corporate engagement. The study thus aims to contribute towards a better understanding of the corporate–conflict nexus, as a step towards identifying potential mechanisms for monitoring corporate behaviour in conflict zones.

A key obstacle to investigating MNCs’ behaviour in conflict zones is that companies do not often share sensitive information.³⁶ Thus, accessing corporate records and confidential company data is an obstacle to analysis. However, the documentary, *Firestone and the Warlord*, brought to light primary sources of information that have, to date, not been comprehensively dealt with in an academic study. This study seeks to fill this gap in the existing literature by using these sources, along with relevant secondary sources, to analyse the strategic behaviour of Firestone during the First Liberian Civil War. Through the study of a prominent MNC operating in a conflict zone, this study aims to contribute more broadly towards a comprehensive understanding of contemporary conflicts. While MNCs are active across numerous sectors, this study posits that resource-reliant MNCs are particularly significant actors within conflict settings and can act as decisive intervening variables in conflict dynamics. The particular significance of analysing a resource-reliant MNC within the context of the case study is founded on the centrality of natural resources to the Liberian civil conflict.³⁷ While it must be noted that Firestone was by no means the only company to play a role in the conflict, its significance in Liberia’s history and the weight of the allegations laid against it make it a particularly interesting and relevant case study.

³⁴ Ben Miller, Dost Bardouille and Sarah Cechvala, “Business and Armed Non-State Actors: Dilemmas, Challenges, and a Way Forward” (Cambridge, MA: CDA Collaborative Learning Projects, 2014), <http://cdacollaborative.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/Business-and-Armed-Non-State-Actors-Dilemmas-Challenges-and-a-Way-Forward.pdf>.

³⁵ Achim Wennmann, “The Political Economy of Conflict Financing: A Comprehensive Approach Beyond Natural Resources,” *Global Governance*, vol. 13, no. 3 (July – September 2007), 435, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27800670>.

³⁶ William Rosenau, et al., *Corporations and Counterinsurgency* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2009), 2.

³⁷ Whetho, “Natural Resources, Profit and Peace.”

5. Research Design

This study is a theory-generating case study that investigates the relationship between MNCs involved in the resource sector and relevant actors within a conflict. Research reveals that not all companies will have the same effect on conflict dynamics and not all companies will play the same role. Moreover, different companies will be driven by different impetuses and have different degrees of agency depending on factors such as the characteristics of the conflict and the organisational structure of the corporation. As such, this study analyses an individual case within the corporate–conflict platform to allow for a more in-depth analysis, as opposed to a broader, high-n case study. The case involves the strategic behaviour of Firestone in the First Liberian Civil War, which lasted from 1989 until 1997. The period June 1990 to November 1992 is emphasised, as this was when Firestone Liberia was most actively engaged with actors in the conflict. While the existing literature on MNCs in conflict is used as a blueprint for investigating the role played by Firestone in the conflict, the purpose of the study is ultimately to add to a general conceptual framework through its findings.

6. Research Methodology

This paper makes use of qualitative and quantitative evidence as well as historical approaches to investigate the subject matter. As mentioned, the recent uncovering of pertinent primary sources detailing the actions of Firestone during the First Liberian Civil War provides the foundation for this study. These sources include letters sent by Firestone executives to both the Liberian state and Taylor's NPRAG, various cables and business reports that document the deals made, and personal accounts of the events that took place.³⁸ In addition, transcripts from Taylor's trial at The Hague and interviews

³⁸ Memorandum of understanding between National Patriotic Reconstruction Assembly Government (NPRAG) and the Firestone Plantations Company (FPCO), January 18, 1992;
Memorandum of discussion, May 22, 1992;
Cable, May 1991;
Cable, August 1991;
Cable, October 1991;
Cable, July 1992;
Cable, October 1992;
Cable, November 1992;
Ensminger, Donald, diary entries, June 6–13, 1990;
Ensminger, Donald, letter from Donald Ensminger to Charles Taylor, October 3, 1990;
Ensminger, Donald, "The Effect of the Liberian Civil War on the Firestone Plantations Company," aide-memoire, October 10, 1990;
Firestone Plantations Company, Schedule of Tax Payments to the NPRAG, March 22, 1993;
Firestone Plantations Company, "1992 Production and Shipments," April 13, 1993;
Schremp, John, letter from John Schremp to Francis T. Karpeh, July 8, 1993;

with key individuals who witnessed the civil war provide human insight into the role that Firestone played in the conflict's dynamics. Official company data for the Bridgestone Group are also used. This study also makes extensive use of secondary sources, consisting of various peer-reviewed books and journals, documentaries and reputable newspaper articles. In order to ensure the validity of this research, multiple sources of evidence have been employed. By confining the subject matter specifically to MNCs involved in the extraction of natural resources, it is hoped that the findings of this study will be more credible and thus useful for further research on the topic. Triangulation research methodologies are thus employed to generate greater confidence in the findings.

7. Limitations and Delimitations

This study is limited to analysing the role of Firestone in the First Liberian Civil War, which took place from 1989 until 1997. More specifically, the study looks at the period between 1990 and 1992, when Firestone was most active in Liberia. While a more comprehensive study of the various MNCs operating in Liberia during the First Civil War is desirable, this study is confined to analysing only the role played by Firestone. While the relationship between Firestone and Taylor during his presidency would no doubt be of interest, time restrictions and a paucity of information on this period precludes this. Furthermore, it is acknowledged that broad generalisations cannot be made from the analysis of a single case study. However, the hope is that the findings of this study will stimulate further academic research into the role and impact of MNCs in conflict zones.

8. Chapter Outline

Chapter Two comprises five sections. The first looks at the broader academic landscape in order to contextualise the literature pertaining to the role of MNCs in conflict. The second section addresses the structure of the existing literature on the topic, while the third section identifies prominent themes in the literature. The fourth section addresses the literature on the Firestone Liberia case study and the final section provides a summary of Chapter Two. The purpose of this chapter is to identify patterns and gaps in the existing literature and to provide an academic context for analysis.

Schremp, John, letter from John Schremp to Charles Taylor, December 20, 1991;
Schremp, John, letter from John Schremp to N. Mornorkonmana, July 5, 1991.

Chapter Three is divided into four sections. The first is an investigation of the factors of the First Liberian Civil War and includes an analysis of the historic context and the Doe dictatorship. Here, the importance of Liberia's cultural structure and history of violence are emphasised, as is the impact of regional and international dimensions. The following section investigates Firestone Liberia's relationship within the state and within the context of its economic history. The third section provides details on the history of Firestone in order to establish the corporate structure of the company during the conflict. The final section is a summary of the chapter.

Chapter Four is an examination of Firestone's behaviour along the conflict trajectory. The chapter is structured chronologically in order to show how changes in conflict dynamics affected the decisions made by Firestone Liberia and its parent company, BFS. Ultimately, the purpose of Chapter Four is to unpack the possible motivations for Firestone's behaviour while taking into account the degree of agency available to the company within the constraints of a particularly violent conflict.

Chapter Five provides a summary of findings based on the original research aims. This includes an emphasis on the importance of geo-economic and geo-political factors, as well as the impact of conflict characteristics and corporate structure, on a company's agency. The chapter concludes by addressing the consequences of these findings for monitoring the role of corporate actors in conflict zones.

9. Key Terms

Conflict-affected environment

According to the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), "a conflict-affected environment refers to countries or regions where there is a high risk of violent conflict breaking out; that are in the midst of violent conflict; or have recently emerged from it, including countries classified as 'post-conflict' ".³⁹

Corporate-conflict nexus

In this study, this term is used to refer to the role of corporate actors in conflict settings as it is discussed within the existing literature on the topic.

³⁹ van Dorp, *Multinational Corporations and Conflict*, 12.

Foreign direct investment (FDI)

Foreign direct investment (FDI) refers to the process where a corporation in one country sets up a business operation in another country. This is achieved by establishing a new wholly owned affiliate company, through the acquisition of an existing local company or a joint venture in the host country.⁴⁰

Multinational corporation (MNC)

As John Ruggie points out, there is no universally accepted definition for a multinational corporation.⁴¹ However, the term is used in this paper to refer to a business entity that comprises companies involved in commercial operations in more than one state.⁴² According to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) Guidelines for Multinational Enterprises, “[w]hile one or more of these entities may be able to exercise a significant influence over the activities of others, their degree of autonomy within the enterprise may vary widely from one multinational enterprise to another”.⁴³ Moreover, the ownership structure can be state-owned, private or a combination.⁴⁴

Subsidiary

For this paper, a subsidiary is understood as a value-adding commercial activity outside of a MNC’s home state.⁴⁵

⁴⁰ Jessie Chella, “The Complicity of Multinational Corporations in International Crimes: An Examination of Principles” (PhD dissertation, Bond University, 2012), 24; United Nations, “Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) Net Inflows and Net Outflows as Share of GDP,” http://www.un.org/esa/sustdev/natlinfo/indicators/methodology_sheets/global_econ_partnership/fdi.pdf.

⁴¹ John Gerard Ruggie, “Multinationals as Global Institution: Power, Authority and Relative Autonomy,” *Regulation & Governance* (2017): 2. https://www.business-humanrights.org/sites/default/files/documents/Ruggie-2017-Regulation_Governance.pdf.

⁴² Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), *OECD Guidelines for Multinational Enterprises* (Paris: OECD Publishing, 2011), <http://www.oecd.org/daf/inv/mne/48004323.pdf>.

⁴³ OECD, *OECD Guidelines for Multinational Enterprises*, 17.

⁴⁴ OECD, *OECD Guidelines for Multinational Enterprises*, 17.

⁴⁵ Julian Birkinshaw, “Chapter 14: Strategy and Management in MNE Subsidiaries,” in *The Oxford Handbook of International Business*, ed. Alan M. Rugman and Thomas L. Brewer (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 380.

CHAPTER TWO

Chapter Two is a comprehensive review of the existing literature on the corporate-conflict nexus as well as the literature on Firestone Liberia during the civil war. The literature on the role of business in conflict is contextualised within the broader debate of the “new wars” thesis, wherein the political economy of contemporary conflicts (and the role of natural resources within such conflicts) is emphasised. The next section addresses the broader academic landscape in which the corporate–conflict literature is situated in order to provide context to the debate.

Section 1 | The Broader Academic Landscape

The nature of warfare in the post-Cold War era has been an area of intense scholarly interest and debate in the field of conflict studies. Central to this has been the discussion about the characteristics of contemporary conflict and whether it is qualitatively different from earlier episodes of war.⁴⁶ The “new wars” theorists contend that contemporary conflict is characterised by a rise in the number of civil wars, an increase in the intensity and barbarity of these conflicts, and the introduction of a plethora of actors to the conflict theatre.⁴⁷ Conflict is thus framed as the breakdown of the normal functioning of the state, where “war” and “peace” are understood as distinct categories.⁴⁸ In this way, the resort to violence is seen to be irrational and conflict is framed as the result of long-suppressed intrastate ethnic and religious animosities.⁴⁹

However, studies conducted by Mats Berdal, David M. Malone, David Keen, William Reno, Mark Duffield and Paul Collier, among others, emphasise the role of economic incentives in shaping the calculations and behaviour of actors in a conflict.⁵⁰ They argue

⁴⁶ Gabriel I. H. Williams, *Liberia: The Heart of Darkness, Accounts of Liberia's Civil War and its Destabilizing Effects on West Africa* (Trafford Publishing: Victoria, Canada, 2002), 84.

⁴⁷ Mark Duffield, *Global Governance and the New Wars: The Merging of Development and Security* (London: Zed Books, 2001), 17;

Mary Kaldor, *New and Old Wars: Organized Violence in a Global Era* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999), 3.

⁴⁸ Robert D. Kaplan, “The Coming Anarchy,” *The Atlantic*, February, 1994, accessed November 13, 2017, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1994/02/the-coming-anarchy/304670/>; Berdal and Malone, introduction to *Greed and Grievance*, 6.

⁴⁹ Berdal and Malone, introduction to *Greed and Grievance*, 6.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*;

Paul Collier and Anke Hoeffler, “On Economic Causes of Civil War,” *Oxford Economic Papers*, vol. 50, no. 4 (October 1998), <https://academic.oup.com/oep/article-abstract/50/4/563/2361691>;

William Reno, “Shadow States and the Political Economy of Civil Wars,” in *Greed and Grievance: Economic Agendas in Civil Wars*, ed. Berdal and David M. Malone (Boulder, Colorado: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2000);

that the disappearance of superpower funding in the post-Cold War period initiated a trend of combatant self-financing in contemporary conflict.⁵¹ This trend has been facilitated by economic globalisation, which has provided opportunities for combatants to access international trade networks (licit and illicit) through which they may transform captured resources into war materiel and financing. Some scholars contend that combatant access to international trade networks and markets has increased the economic benefits of conflict, resulting in the protraction of violence.⁵² Duffield argues that the very “transnational and networked characteristics”⁵³ of contemporary war economies have precipitated the emergence of a new context in which conflict is studied.

In this context, scholars such as Collier, Keen, Duffield and Reno have written extensively on what they term the “political economy” of civil wars. Some, such as Collier, focus on the role of economic agendas in initiating conflict, while others, such as Reno, address the role of economic motivations in the perpetuation of conflict.⁵⁴ Integral to many of these studies is the role of natural resources and, in particular, an abundance of these resources. Authors such as Indra de Soysa find that greed, encouraged by natural resource abundance, can fuel civil war, a phenomenon referred to as the

David Keen, *The Economic Functions of Violence in Civil Wars*, Adelphi Paper no. 320 (London: International Institute of Strategic Studies, 1998);

David Keen, “Incentives and Disincentives for Violence,” in *Greed and Grievance: Economic Agendas in Civil Wars*, ed. Mats Berdal and David M. Malone (Boulder, Colorado: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2000);

Mark Duffield, “Globalization, Transborder Trade, and War Economies,” in *Greed and Grievance: Economic Agendas in Civil Wars*, ed. Mats Berdal and David M. Malone (Boulder, Colorado: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2000);

Paul Collier, Anke Hoeffler and Måns Söderbom, “On the Duration of Civil War,” *Journal of Peace Research*, vol. 41, no. 3 (May 2004), <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4149744>;

James D. Fearon, “Why Do Some Civil Wars Last So Much Longer Than Others?” *Journal of Peace Research*, vol. 41, no. 3 (2004), 275–301, DOI: 10.1177/0022343304043769.

⁵¹ Karen Ballantine and Jake Sherman, eds, *The Political Economy of Armed Conflict: Beyond Greed and Grievance* (Boulder, Colorado: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2003);

Karen Ballantine and Heiko Nitzschke, “Beyond Greed and Grievance: Policy Lessons from Studies in the Political Economy of Armed Conflict,” *International Peace Academy Policy Report*, 2003;

Duffield, “Globalization, Transborder Trade, and War Economies.”

⁵² Ballantine and Nitzschke, “Business and Armed Conflict”;

Duffield, “Globalization, Transborder Trade, and War Economies”;

William Reno, “Shadow States and the Political Economy of Civil Wars”;

Paul Collier, “Doing Well Out of War: An Economic Perspective,” in *Greed and Grievance: Economic Agendas in Civil Wars*, ed. Mats Berdal and David M. Malone (Boulder, Colorado: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2000);

Saragen Naidoo, “The Role of War Economies in Understanding Contemporary Conflicts,” *Global Insight*, no. 2 (September 2000), http://www.igd.org.za/jdownloads/Global%20Insight/gi_2.pdf.

⁵³ Duffield, “Globalization, Transborder Trade, and War Economies,” 46.

⁵⁴ Collier and Hoeffler, “On Economic Causes of Civil War”;

Reno, “Shadow States and the Political Economy of Civil Wars”;

Keen, “Incentives and Disincentives for Violence”;

Duffield, “Globalization, Transborder Trade, and War Economies”;

Collier et al., “On the Duration of Civil War”;

Fearon, “Why Do Some Civil Wars Last So Much Longer Than Others?”

“resource curse”.⁵⁵ More recent studies investigate how factors such as the location and character of resources affect their centrality to conflict dynamics.⁵⁶ This focus on the exploitation, taxation and exportation of natural resources drew both public and academic attention to the role of MNCs in contemporary conflict in the 1990s.

Section 2 | The Structure of the Existing Literature

2.1. The Emergence of Public and Academic Interest

The conversation around the role of business in conflict began in the US and Europe in the 1990s, when policymakers and human rights advocates alike began to conflate questions about the increased global presence of MNCs and the perceived increase in violent civil conflict.⁵⁷ This led to an increase in non-governmental organisations (NGO) and international organisations’ (IO) attention on the behaviour of MNCs in conflict settings. NGOs such as Global Witness, International Alert, Human Rights Watch and the International Committee for the Red Cross have been integral in investigating and exposing the roles played by private actors in contemporary conflicts.⁵⁸ Prominent scholarly contributions to the literature on the relationship between MNCs and violent conflict include Jane Nelson,⁵⁹ Karen Ballantine,⁶⁰ William Reno⁶¹ and Phillippe Le

⁵⁵ Indriya de Soysa, “The Resource Curse: Are Civil Wars Driven by Rapacity or Paucity?” in *Greed and Grievance: Economic Agendas in Civil Wars*, ed. Mats Berdal and David M. Malone (Boulder, Colorado: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2000);

Richard M. Auty, ed., *Resource Abundance and Economic Development*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001);

Philippe Le Billon, “The Geopolitical Economy of ‘Resource Wars,’” *Geopolitics*, vol. 9, no. 1 (2004), <https://doi.org/10.1080/14650040412331307812>.

⁵⁶ Philippe Le Billon, “The Political Ecology of War: Natural Resources and Armed Conflict,” *Political Geography*, vol. 20, no. 5 (June 2001), DOI: 10.1016/S0962-6298(01)00015-4.

⁵⁷ Berman, “Boardrooms and Bombs.”

⁵⁸ Michael Ross, “The Natural Resource Curse: How Wealth Can Make You Poor,” in *Natural Resources and Violent Conflict: Options and Actions*, ed. Ian Bannon and Paul Collier (Washington, DC: The World Bank, 2003), 337;

Ballantine and Nitzschke, “Business and Armed Conflict.”

⁵⁹ Jane Nelson, *The Business of Peace: The Private Sector as a Partner in Conflict Prevention and Resolution* (London: The Prince of Wales Business Leaders Forum, International Alert and Council on Economic Priorities, 2000), <http://www.international-alert.org/sites/default/files/publications/The%20Business%20of%20Peace.pdf>.

⁶⁰ Karen Ballantine and Heiko Nitzschke, “The Political Economy of Civil War and Conflict Transformation,” *Berghof Handbook for Conflict Transformation*, series no. 3 (2005), <https://www.berghof-foundation.org/publications/handbook/handbook-dialogues/3-transforming-war-economies/>;

Ballantine and Nitzschke, “Beyond Greed and Grievance”;

Ballantine and Sherman, *The Political Economy of Armed Conflict: Beyond Greed and Grievance*.

⁶¹ William Reno, *Warlord Politics and African States* (Boulder, Colorado: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1998); William Reno, “Foreign Firms and the Financing of Charles Taylor’s NPFL,” *Liberian Studies Journal*, vol. 13, no. 2 (1993);

Reno, “Shadow States and the Political Economy of Civil Wars.”

Billon⁶², among others.

Most of the existing literature on the corporate–conflict nexus sets the problem within the context of the post-Cold War period, when world politics was undergoing major changes. As such, academic studies mostly take their cues from the new wars discourse. They emphasise the intensity and duration of contemporary conflict and, even more so, the economic agendas of combatants. The literature thus fits into the discourse on the political economy of civil conflicts and investigates the role of MNCs in causing and perpetuating conflict by facilitating the rapaciousness of combatants. There is also broad recognition of the role that globalisation has played in aiding the rapid expansion of MNCs, as well as in opening up new opportunities for combatants to translate resources into revenue through access to global networks and markets.⁶³

2.2. The Evidence and Methods Used

The majority of the existing literature is qualitative in nature.⁶⁴ While many of the academic works reviewed are qualitative, these studies typically employ triangulation research methodologies to build a more credible evidence base. Much of the evidence gathered for NGO and IO articles was sourced from news articles and (often anonymous) interviews. Some NGO and IO reports, as well as academic studies, also rely on field research carried out in conflict or post-conflict zones. However, caution was taken when assessing these reports. Due to the nature of NGO work and the reliance on

⁶² Philippe Le Billon and Eric Nicholls, "Ending 'Resource Wars': Revenue Sharing, Economic Sanction or Military Intervention?" *International Peacekeeping*, vol. 14, no. 5 (2007), DOI: 10.1080/13533310701753941;

Le Billon, "The Geopolitical Economy of 'Resource Wars'";

Le Billon, "The Political Ecology of War."

⁶³ Ballantine and Nitzschke, "Beyond Greed and Grievance";

Kanagaretnam and Brown, *Business, Conflict, and Peacebuilding*;

Bannon and Collier, "Natural Resources and Conflict";

Berdal and Malone, introduction to *Greed and Grievance*;

Duffield, "Globalization, Transborder Trade, and War Economies."

⁶⁴ Scholarly works include Ballantine and Nitzschke (2003, 2005), Ballantine and Sherman (2003), Bannon and Collier (2003), Patey (2006, 2007), Reno (1993, 1998, 2000) and Duffield (2001), among others.

Reports include, among others: Global Witness, "Taylor-made: The Pivotal Role of Liberia's Forests and Flag of Convenience in Regional Conflict," September 2001, accessed February 12, 2018,

<https://www.globalwitness.org/sites/default/files/pdfs/taylormade2.pdf>;

Global Witness, "Logging Off: How the Liberian Timber Industry Fuels Liberia's Humanitarian Disaster and Threatens Sierra Leone", August 31, 2002, accessed August 12, 2017,

<http://www.globalwitness.org/reports/download.php/00038.pdf>;

Global Witness, "A Rough Trade: The Role of Companies and Governments in the Angolan Conflict,"

December 1, 1998, accessed August 12, 2017,

<http://www.globalwitness.org/reports/index.php?section=diamonds>;

Christian Aid, "The Scorched Earth: Oil and War in Sudan," *Relief Web*, April 6, 2001, accessed September 29, 2017, https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/23E203642DF3801485256A15007EA387-chr_aid-sud14mar3.pdf.

external funding, these reports can contain bias and sensationalism.⁶⁵ While this might bring into question the credibility of NGO reports as reliable knowledge, these reports offer detailed accounts of their subject matter and provide a useful divergence from the theoretical abstraction often found in academic studies.⁶⁶ To illustrate key points, reports and academic studies alike employ case studies that vary in form from examinations of a single company in one country⁶⁷ to multiple companies in one country,⁶⁸ to multiple examples of both.⁶⁹

Section 3 | Prominent Themes in the Literature

3.1. Identification of Different Private Business Actors

In their study, Ballantine and Nitzschke offer a taxonomy to distinguish “companies whose legitimate business activities have negative but unintended effects on conflict dynamics” from those that “deliberately seek to profit from war by conducting the – often illicit and always predatory – business of war”.⁷⁰ Research reveals that the chaos of conflict can open up profitable opportunities for some commercial actors whose business models rely on relationships formed with local elites and strongmen. According to Collier, Hoeffler and Söderbom, these “rogue companies”⁷¹ use the instability of conflict as a cover for doing business, profiting from providing combatants with necessary goods and services. They point to prominent private security companies, such as Blackwater, that have directly benefited from the conflict in Iraq, to illustrate this claim.⁷²

However, there are also companies that have a vested interest in a peaceful operating environment. Some of these companies will choose to withdraw when conflict erupts;

⁶⁵ Christian Aid, “The Scorched Earth,” 4, 21.

⁶⁶ Scott Pegg and Alissa Wilson, “Feature Review,” *Third World Quarterly*, vol. 24, no. 6 (2003), DOI: 10.1080/01436590310001630125.

⁶⁷ Rosenau et al., *Corporations and Counterinsurgency*.

⁶⁸ Patey, *A Complex Reality*;

Reno, “Foreign Firms and the Financing of Charles Taylor’s NPFL”;

Reno, *Warlord Politics and African States*;

Global Witness, “Logging Off”;

Global Witness, “A Rough Trade”;

Christian Aid, “The Scorched Earth.”

⁶⁹ Ballantine and Nitzschke, “Business and Armed Conflict”;

Reno, *Warlord Politics and African States*;

Reno, “Shadow States and the Political Economy of Civil Wars.”

⁷⁰ Ballantine and Nitzschke, “Business and Armed Conflict,” 38.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 39.

⁷² Collier et al., “On the Duration of Civil War.”

however, others elect to keep operations running in spite of the instability. The literature points to a handful of factors that might influence which companies exit a conflict. Some scholars argue more generally that companies with relatively low capital investment and mobile assets often decide to cease operations and withdraw from conflict-affected areas.⁷³ Other studies emphasise the industry within which the company operates and the nature of its operations as significant determining factors.⁷⁴ Additionally, some assert that the historical experience of the company within the host state as well as the severity of the conflict must be taken into consideration.⁷⁵ However, there is a general lack of research into the factors that drive MNC decision-making in conflict situations, which often leads to simplistic assumptions of profit-maximisation as a motivating force in the literature.⁷⁶ This study seeks to address this issue by unpacking the possible motivations for Firestone's decisions to cease or restart operations.

3.2. Rebel-centric Approaches

Collier and Hoeffler's seminal study, *Greed and Grievance in Civil War*, has had a notable influence on the way in which analyses of the political economy of contemporary conflicts are approached. Their study uses quantitative reasoning to show that contemporary civil conflict is primarily fuelled by greed and that natural resources can provide opportunities for the outbreak of rebellion and for rebel groups to finance their activities during conflict. The influence of the "greedy rebels" narrative is evident in the literature, which focuses on the negative consequences of the relationship between rebels and business actors.⁷⁷ The policy implication of the "greedy rebel" narrative is that business actors are expected not to engage with rebels or, if not possible, to withdraw from the environment. Therefore, any engagement (perceived or real) with

⁷³ Patey, *A Complex Reality*;

Ballantine and Nitzschke, "Business and Armed Conflict";

Jake Sherman, *Private Sector Actors in Zones of Conflict: Research Challenges and Policy Responses* (New York: International Peace Academy, 2001), 5, https://www.ipinst.org/wp-content/uploads/publications/pdf_report_private_sector.pdf.

⁷⁴ Miller et al., "Business and Armed Non-State Actors";

Nelson, *The Business of Peace*;

Miller et al., "Business and Armed Non-State Actors";

Berman, "Boardrooms and Bombs."

⁷⁵ Nelson, *The Business of Peace*;

Berman, "Boardrooms and Bombs."

⁷⁶ Patey, *A Complex Reality*, 6.

⁷⁷ Ballantine and Nitzschke, "The Political Economy of Civil War and Conflict Transformation," 4;

Ballantine and Sherman, *The Political Economy of Armed Conflict*, 10;

Global Witness, "The Charles Taylor Verdict: A Global Witness Briefing on a Dictator, Blood Diamonds and Timber, and Two Countries in Recovery," April 2012, accessed August 8, 2017,

<https://www.globalwitness.org/en/archive/charles-taylor-verdict-global-witness-briefing-dictator-blood-diamonds-and-timber-and-two/>.

rebel actors is received with reproach and negative attention. This is particularly relevant to the natural resource-reliant companies, which have faced a disproportionate number of lawsuits compared to companies in other sectors.⁷⁸

3.3. Focus on the Natural Resource Sector

There is general consensus in the literature that MNCs that rely on natural resources are most likely to remain when conflict erupts.⁷⁹ According to Patey, resource-extracting corporations represent the majority of what Ballantine and Nitzschke term the “legitimate” side of corporate activity in conflict zones.⁸⁰ There is thus a tendency in the literature to focus on large MNCs in the resource sector, as the substantial, immobile and capital-intensive nature of their investments makes them more determined to continue operations when conflict erupts.⁸¹ According to Bray, these substantial investments amount to a type of hostage situation, as once these MNCs pay for high-cost fixed assets, they cannot easily withdraw from their host country.⁸² Particular attention is afforded to case studies of Sierra Leone (diamonds), Sudan (oil) and Liberia (timber), as well as Angola and the DRC.⁸³ A number of NGO and IO reports also single out certain prominent MNCs such as British Petroleum (BP), De Beers, ExxonMobil and Royal Dutch Shell for their activities in various conflict zones.⁸⁴ Their international visibility and

⁷⁸ Michael Connor, “Business and Human Rights: Interview with John Ruggie,” *Business Ethics*, October 30, 2011, accessed November 12, 2017, <http://business-ethics.com/2011/10/30/8127-un-principles-on-business-and-human-rights-interview-with-john-ruggie/>.

⁷⁹ John Bray, “Attracting Reputable Companies to Risky Environments: Petroleum and Mining Companies,” in *Natural Resources and Violent Conflict: Options and Actions*, ed. Ian Bannon and Paul Collier (Washington, DC: The World Bank, 2003).

⁸⁰ Patey, *A Complex Reality*;

Ballantine and Nitzschke, “Business and Armed Conflict.”

⁸¹ Ballantine and Nitzschke, “Business and Armed Conflict”;

Bray, “Attracting Reputable Companies to Risky Environments”;

Le Billon, “The Political Ecology of War.”

⁸² Bray, “Attracting Reputable Companies to Risky Environments,” 292;

Juliette Bennett, “Multinational Corporations, Social Responsibility and Conflict,” *Journal of International Affairs*, vol. 55, no. 2 (Spring 2002), 5, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24358177>;

OECD, *OECD Guidelines for Multinational Enterprises*.

⁸³ Christian Aid, “The Scorched Earth”;

Global Witness, “A Rough Trade”;

Patey, *A Complex Reality*;

Luke Anthony Patey, “State Rules: Oil Companies and Armed Conflict in Sudan,” *Third World Quarterly*, vol. 28, no. 5 (2007), 997-1016, url: <http://www.jstor.org.ezproxy.uct.ac.za/stable/20454976>;

Global Witness, “Logging Off”;

Global Witness, “Taylor-made”;

Berdal and Malone, introduction to *Greed and Governance*;

De Soysa, “The Resource Curse”;

Boge et al., “Who’s Minding the Store?”

⁸⁴ Ballantine and Nitzschke, “Business and Armed Conflict,” 37;

Global Witness, “A Rough Trade”;

Berdal and Malone, introduction to *Greed and Governance*;

economic prowess, along with their significance to the economies of their host countries, make these companies particularly notable actors within contemporary conflict analysis. In addition, MNCs headquartered in the west are most commonly cited in the literature. While some studies refer broadly to natural resources, much of the academic literature emphasises those MNCs involved in the extraction of oil, gas and diamonds,⁸⁵ while the roles of MNCs whose operations rely on other resources are typically overlooked.

3.4. Recognition of the Risks of Operating in a Conflict

It is widely acknowledged in the academic literature that legitimate companies have a vested interest in a peaceful operating environment and that capital- and trade-intensive companies are the most vulnerable during conflict.⁸⁶ Studies emphasise that business actors can be affected in different ways and to differing degrees by the eruption of violent conflict in a host state.⁸⁷ The impact can be direct, such as the destruction of corporate infrastructure or the kidnapping or killing of employees, or indirect, felt through disruptions in the supply chain, the inability of employees to get to work, or even a drop in the demand for a company's goods or services.⁸⁸ A number of authors also emphasise the reputational risks that companies might face if they remain in a conflict setting.⁸⁹

Nelson, *The Business of Peace: The Private Sector as a Partner in Conflict Prevention and Resolution*;

Patey, "State Rules";

Boge et al., "Who's Minding the Store?"

⁸⁵ Lipman, "Charles Taylor's Criminal Network";

Christian Aid, "The Scorched Earth";

Patey, *A Complex Reality*;

Patey, "State Rules";

Global Witness, "A Rough Trade";

Global Witness. "The Charles Taylor Verdict: A Global Witness Briefing on a Dictator, Blood Diamonds and

Timber, and Two Countries in Recovery," April 2012, accessed August 8, 2017,

<https://www.globalwitness.org/en/archive/charles-taylor-verdict-global-witness-briefing-dictator-blood-diamonds-and-timber-and-two/>;

Ballantine and Sherman, *The Political Economy of Armed Conflict*.

⁸⁶ Ballantine and Nitzschke, "Business and Armed Conflict";

Berdal and Malone, introduction to *Greed and Governance*.

⁸⁷ Collier and Hoeffler, "On the Economic Causes of Civil War."

⁸⁸ Rosenau, et al., *Corporations and Counterinsurgency*, 3;

Bannon and Collier, "Natural Resources and Conflict";

Bray, "Attracting Reputable Companies to Risky Environments";

Nelson, *The Business of Peace: The Private Sector as a Partner in Conflict Prevention and Resolution*;

Kathleen A. Getz and Jennifer Oetzel, "MNE Strategic Intervention in Violent Conflict: Variations Based on

Conflict Characteristics," *Journal of Business Ethics*, vol. 89, no. 4 (2009),

<http://www.jstor.org/stable/40605376>.

⁸⁹ Rosenau, et al., *Corporations and Counterinsurgency*;

3.5. Corporate Activities and their Impacts on the Conflict

There is a tendency in the literature to view the impacts that business actors may have as two diametrically opposed possibilities. That is, the relationship between business actors and conflict is perceived as being either “conflict-reducing” or “conflict-aggravating”.⁹⁰

3.5.1. Conflict-reducing Behaviour

Literature on the positive impact of business actors is thin; however, there are a few studies that argue that when their profits are at risk, MNCs might act in ways that alleviate violence and contribute to the resolution of the conflict.⁹¹ For example, MNCs with large operation sites at times offer spaces for employees and their families to seek refuge when the threat of danger is high.⁹² Some studies point out that private actors sometimes engage in a form of “state-building” in their host countries through, for example, sponsoring workshops on community cohesion and peaceful coexistence or even putting pressure on government to commit to particular reforms.⁹³ However, there is a lack of research into the factors that might cause some companies to adopt active strategies to alleviate conflict, while others do not.

3.5.2. Conflict-aggravating Behaviour

In the literature, the activities believed to aggravate conflict dynamics are typically regarded as resulting from either financial transactions or on-the-ground operations.⁹⁴

3.5.2.1. Financial Transactions

Many scholars note that companies may exacerbate conflict through contractual and extracontractual payments made to allow for operations to continue.⁹⁵ The evidence

Bray, “Attracting Reputable Companies to Risky Environments”;
Ballantine and Nitzschke, “Business and Armed Conflict.”

⁹⁰ Sherman, *Private Sector Actors in Zones of Conflict*.

⁹¹ OECD, “Multinational Enterprises in Situations of Violent Conflict and Widespread Human Rights Abuses,” *OECD Working Papers on International Investment*, no. 01 (May 2002): 7, https://www.oecd.org/daf/inv/investment-policy/WP-2002_1.pdf.

⁹² Rosenau et al., *Corporations and Counterinsurgency*.

⁹³ Ibid., 4.

⁹⁴ Ballantine and Nitzschke, “Business and Armed Conflict.”

⁹⁵ Sherman, *Private Sector Actors in Zones of Conflict*, 4.

shows that resource-seeking MNCs will pay “whoever is in power” to ensure continued access to critical resources within a conflict zone.⁹⁶ These transactions can range from petty cash paid to allow for the transit of goods past a checkpoint, to the payment of huge concessions that include signature bonuses or resource-collateralised loans rewarded to combatants in advance of commercial operations.⁹⁷ A few studies also recognise that payments can be in forms other than money, such as the provision of vehicles and the allocation of humanitarian aid.⁹⁸ According to Le Billon, companies that seek to maintain access to critical resources often:

invest in rebel factions with an eye to accessing resource areas in the short-term while paying the government to keep longer-term options open, or vice versa.⁹⁹

Some studies point out that MNC support for a faction (whether indirect or direct) can lead to a military impasse by reinforcing the dominance of certain actors and changing the balance of power in the conflict theatre.¹⁰⁰ Richani points out that during the Colombian conflict, resource-reliant MNCs aided the formation and financing of right-wing paramilitary groups while at the same time satisfying social investment demands in guerrilla-controlled areas.¹⁰¹ In addition, these MNCs provided the state with vital resources to fund their military campaign against the insurgency. As a result, it is argued that these MNCs played an integral role in establishing a military impasse, which could explain the protraction of the violence.¹⁰² Thus, while the literature disproportionately focuses on MNC relations with rebels, there is evidence that business actors tend to “play all sides” in a conflict, which can frustrate peace efforts.¹⁰³

A number of studies point to the damaging effects of a company’s procurement of protection and security measures.¹⁰⁴ MNCs are often required by national legislation to acquire security services from governments in their host countries. Through the

⁹⁶ Philippe Le Billon, *Fuelling War: Natural Resources and Armed Conflicts* (New York and London: Routledge, 2005), 31.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ Reno, “Chapter 4 Liberia: Durable Illicit Power Structures,” *The Journal of Complex Operations* (May 2016), <http://cco.ndu.edu/News/Article/780165/chapter-4-liberia-durable-illicit-power-structures/>; Reno, “Foreign Firms and the Financing of Charles Taylor’s NPFL.”

⁹⁹ Le Billon, *Fuelling War*, 71.

¹⁰⁰ Rosenau et al., *Corporations and Counterinsurgency*, 34.

¹⁰¹ Nazih Richani, “Multinational Corporations, Rentier Capitalism, and the War System in Colombia,” *Latin American Politics and Society*, vol. 47, no. 3 (2005), 124–125, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4490420>.

¹⁰² Ibid., 125.

¹⁰³ Le Billon, *Fuelling War: Natural Resources and Armed Conflicts*;

Richani, “Multinational Corporations, Rentier Capitalism, and the War System in Colombia.”

¹⁰⁴ Banfield, et al., “Transnational Corporations in Conflict-prone Zones”; Ballantine and Nitzschke, “Business and Armed Conflict.”

provision of supplies to government security forces, MNCs might indirectly support repressive regimes.¹⁰⁵ However, much of the existing literature examines the impact that the procurement of protection from rebel forces can have on conflict dynamics. The literature also addresses the issues related to MNCs indirectly financing combatants through the payment of ransom fees for kidnapped employees.¹⁰⁶ Bannon and Collier point to the Colombian conflict in the 1990s to illustrate this, as revenue from kidnapping was the third-largest source of revenue for the National Liberation Army and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia.¹⁰⁷

3.5.2.2. On-the-ground Operational Support

While most of the literature focuses on the impact of financial and other transactions (such as provision of aid), the role that the on-the-ground operations of a company can play is also recognised. Belligerents can accrue wealth and organise militarily by taking control of or gaining access to the sites of MNC operations.¹⁰⁸ Often, these sites are in militarily strategic locations near essential transportation such as airports, roads, railways and ports that are required for commercial operations. The infrastructure and technology available at most of the sites of MNC operations are often also invaluable resources for facilitating military campaigns.¹⁰⁹ Beyond strategic military benefits, there is a strong emphasis on the impact that rebel control of a company's operations and networks can have on conflict dynamics.¹¹⁰ For an armed faction, this control could provide access to potential revenue by turning expropriated assets into tradable commodities. For example, William Rosenau, Peter Chalk, Renny McPherson, Michelle Parker and Austin Long contend that rebel control over the sites of MNC operations provides opportunities for them to simultaneously finance their military pursuits while depriving the state of an important source of revenue.¹¹¹ The literature typically assumes that the state's accumulation of revenue from MNC activities is the status quo

¹⁰⁵ Banfield, et al., "Transnational Corporations in Conflict-prone Zones," 137.

¹⁰⁶ Wennmann, "The Political Economy of Conflict Financing," 435;

Bannon and Collier, "Natural Resources and Conflict."

¹⁰⁶ Ballantine and Nitzschke, "Business and Armed Conflict," 41.

¹⁰⁷ Bannon and Collier, "Natural Resources and Conflict," 6;

Ballantine and Nitzschke, "Business and Armed Conflict," 41.

¹⁰⁸ Boge et al., "Who's Minding the Store?: The Business of Private, Public, and Civil Actors in Zones of Conflict." *Bonn International Centre for Conversion Brief*, vol. 32 (2005), https://www.bicc.de/uploads/tx_bicctools/brief32.pdf.

¹⁰⁹ Boge et al., "Who's Minding the Store?" 16.

¹¹⁰ Le Billon, "The Political Ecology of War";

Banfield et al., "Transnational Corporations in Conflict-prone Zones."

¹¹¹ Rosenau et al., *Corporations and Counterinsurgency*.

and thus is not really an issue to be investigated. This draws back to the dominance of the “greedy rebels” narrative in the literature.

3.6. Business Actors as Peace Actors

Jane Nelson wrote one of the formative studies on the potential for the private sector to participate in conflict prevention and resolution.¹¹² In a 2000 report written with the assistance of three prominent NGOs (International Alert, the Prince of Wales Business Leaders Forum and the Council on Economic Priorities), Nelson put forward the proposition that business has a vested interest in promoting peace in conflict situations and can play a positive role in both conflict prevention and resolution. This agenda is supported by NGOs, in particular peace-building NGOs like International Alert and Search for Common Ground.¹¹³ Studies such as those by Banfield, Haufler and Lilly,¹¹⁴ Ballantine and Nitzschke,¹¹⁵ and Kanagaretnam and Brown¹¹⁶ explore the possibility of engaging private actors in conflict prevention, conflict resolution and post-conflict reconstruction.¹¹⁷ Much of the existing literature relies on the standards and principles developed by IOs as guides for “ethical” business behaviour in conflict.¹¹⁸ However, these guidelines are underdeveloped and lack structural standardisation.

3.7. Section Summary

On the issue of the impact of MNCs on conflict dynamics, Berman provides a succinct assessment of the current literature. He contends that:

¹¹² Nelson, *The Business of Peace*.

¹¹³ van Dorp, *Multinational Corporations and Conflict*.

¹¹⁴ Banfield et al., “Transnational Corporations in Conflict-prone Zones.”

¹¹⁵ Ballantine and Nitzschke, “Business and Armed Conflict.”

¹¹⁶ Kanagaretnam and Brown, *Business, Conflict, and Peacebuilding*.

¹¹⁷ Banfield et al., “Transnational Corporations in Conflict-prone Zones”, 133; van Dorp, *Multinational Corporations and Conflict*.

¹¹⁸ Banfield et al., “Transnational Corporations in Conflict-prone Zones”; Virginia Haufler, “Foreign Investors in Conflict Zones: New Expectations,” *The Political Economy of International Security*. Boulder, Colorado: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2005; David Shearer, “Aiding or Abetting? Humanitarian Aid and Its Economic Role in Civil War,” in *Greed and Grievance: Economic Agendas in Civil Wars*, ed. Mats Berdal and David M. Malone (Boulder, Colorado: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2000); Kanagaretnam and Brown, *Business, Conflict, and Peacebuilding*; Nelson, *The Business of Peace*.

MNCs are at once being called to task for exacerbating armed conflicts and being called upon to participate in their prevention and resolution.¹¹⁹

The first issue with this is that it assumes that all corporate activities in a conflict zone will necessarily have a negative effect on the conflict. Research shows that this is not always the case as corporate activities can have conflict-reducing effects. Moreover, conflict is dynamic and corporate activities are not monolithic. Along the trajectory of violence, corporate activities will affect conflict dynamics just as the dynamics of the conflict will affect the company in return. To say that MNCs exacerbate conflict is to oversimplify the complex and fluid relationships that form between private actors and various factions. Integral to this is a more holistic understanding of the relationship between the MNC and the state on one hand, and other local actors on the other. This study contends that a better understanding of the motivations behind corporate behaviour and the impact on conflict dynamics is needed first in order to conceptualise an operational framework for proactive corporate engagement in conflict zones.

Section 4 | The Literature on the Firestone Liberia Case Study

4.1. The Liberian Civil War Economy

There is widespread recognition in the literature of the role that economic motives and agendas played in the Liberian civil conflict.¹²⁰ A number of scholarly studies that address the issue of the political economy of civil wars more generally make use of Liberia to emphasise certain points, as seen in papers written by Ballantine and Nitzschke,¹²¹ Bannon and Collier,¹²² and Berdal and Malone.¹²³ Other studies concentrate more specifically on the scale and legalities of certain economic activities of the Liberian

¹¹⁹ Berman, "Boardrooms and Bombs."

¹²⁰ Karen Ballantine and Heiko Nitzschke, "The Political Economy of Civil War and Conflict Transformation"; Reno, "Foreign Firms and the Financing of Charles Taylor's NPFL";

Atkinson, "The War Economy in Liberia";

Berdal and Malone, *Greed and Grievance*;

Ellis, "Liberia 1989–1994";

Felix Gerdes, "The Evolution of the Liberian State: A Study in Neo-patrimonial State Formation and Political Change," *Arbeitspapier*, no. 1 (2013),

http://edoc.vifapol.de/opus/volltexte/2015/5813/pdf/AP_Evolution_State_Gerdes_2013_1.pdf;

Michael Ross, "The Natural Resource Curse";

Whetho, "Natural Resources, Profit and Peace."

¹²¹ Ballantine and Nitzschke, "Beyond Greed and Grievance";

Ballantine and Nitzschke, "Business and Armed Conflict."

¹²² Bannon and Collier, "Natural Resources and Conflict."

¹²³ Berdal and Malone, *Greed and Grievance*.

war economy, with a focus on the role of natural resources.¹²⁴ Due to the centrality of natural resources to the Liberian war economy, there is widespread recognition in the literature of the role played by resource-reliant MNCs in the conflict.¹²⁵

Numerous companies have been accused of “aiding and abetting” the actions of economic criminals (rebels), of bribery, and of illegally extracting and selling natural resources in a way that contributed to the Liberian war economy. The role played by Guus Kouwenhoven of the Oriental Timber Corporation is often referred to, to illustrate the impact that private actors had on facilitating war crimes committed during the civil war in Liberia.¹²⁶ Other notable companies include the Danzer Group, the Nimba Mining Company (NIMCO) and Dalhoff Larsen & Horneman (DLH).¹²⁷ In addition, the role of foreign mining and logging firms is emphasised,¹²⁸ while comparatively less attention is

¹²⁴ Janna Lipman, “Charles Taylor’s Criminal Network: Exploiting Diamonds and Children” (graduate student research, Terrorism, Transnational Crime and Corruption Center, George Mason University, 2009), http://tracc.gmu.edu/pdfs/student_research/Lipman_PUBP_710_TOC_Taylor's_Diamonds_and_Children_FINAL.pdf;

Atkinson, “The War Economy in Liberia”;

Felix Gerdes, *Civil War and State Formation: The Political Economy of War and Peace in Liberia* (Frankfurt: Campus Verlag, 2013);

Nelson, *The Business of Peace*;

Ross, “The Natural Resource Curse”;

Whetho, “Natural Resources, Profit and Peace.”

¹²⁵ Whetho, “Natural Resources, Profit and Peace”;

Kanagaretnam and Brown, *Business, Conflict, and Peacebuilding*;

Bannon and Collier, “Natural Resources and Conflict”;

Philip Swanson, Mai Oldgard and Leiv Lunde, “Who Gets the Money? Reporting Resource Revenues,” in *Natural Resources and Violent Conflict: Options and Actions*, ed. Ian Bannon and Paul Collier (Washington, DC: The World Bank, 2003);

Stephen Ellis, *The Mask of Anarchy: The Destruction of Liberia and the Religious Dimension of an African Civil War*, 2nd ed. (New York: New York University Press, 2006).

¹²⁶ Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), *Volume II: Consolidated Final Report*, Republic of Liberia Truth and Reconciliation Commission, 2009, <http://www.pul.org.lr/doc/trc-of-liberia-final-report-volume-ii.pdf>;

Chella, “The Complicity of Multinational Corporations in International Crimes”;

Global Witness, “Logging Off.”

¹²⁷ United Steelworkers of America, “Preliminary Report”;

Lipman, “Charles Taylor’s Criminal Network”;

TRC *Volume II: Consolidated Final Report*;

Reno, “Chapter 4 Liberia”;

Atkinson, “The War Economy in Liberia”;

Ellis, *The Mask of Anarchy*;

Reno, “Foreign Firms and the Financing of Charles Taylor’s NPFL”;

Reno, *Warlord Politics and African States*;

Rosenau et al., *Corporations and Counterinsurgency*;

Global Witness, “Logging Off”;

Global Witness, “The Charles Taylor Verdict”;

Stichting Onderzoek Multinationale Ondernemingen (SOMO). “Multinational corporations in conflict-affected areas: Risks and challenges around human rights and conflict,” December 2015.

<https://www.somo.nl/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/Risks-and-challenges-around-human-rights-and-conflict.pdf>;

Atkinson, “The War Economy in Liberia.”

¹²⁸ Reno, “Chapter 4 Liberia”;

Lipman, “Charles Taylor’s Criminal Network”;

TRC, *Volume II: Consolidated Final Report*;

given to the role of the rubber plantations.¹²⁹

While numerous actors contributed towards the emergence of the Liberian civil war economy, Charles Taylor's involvement has received the most attention. From the 1989 insurgency, Taylor began to build a "multi-state territory in West Africa"¹³⁰ that would eventually include the majority of Liberia as well as parts of Guinea and Sierra Leone. Through this territory – popularly known as "Taylorland" or "Greater Liberia" – Taylor had access to significant resources. In order to extract wealth from these resources, Taylor entered into commercial relationships with numerous foreign firms. As William Reno observes:

Taylor stands as one of the most recent and extreme examples of rule through personal control over resources in Africa, surviving significant challenges to his position and confounding predictions of an early demise.¹³¹

The approach of many of the existing analyses is thus rebel-centric, with particular attention paid to Charles Taylor's economic activities and the impact that his commercial alliances had on conflict dynamics.¹³² By 1992, it was reported that a significant portion of Taylor's tax revenue was coming from foreign firms operating in Liberia and "Firestone was the largest foreign corporation to fall squarely in his camp".

Global Witness, "A Rough Trade";

Global Witness, "Logging Off";

Ellis, *The Mask of Anarchy*;

Reno, "Shadow States and the Political Economy of Civil Wars."

¹²⁹ Reno, *Warlord Politics and African States*.

¹³⁰ United Steelworkers of America, "Preliminary Report," 14.

¹³¹ Reno, *Warlord Politics and African States*.

¹³² Lipman, "Charles Taylor's Criminal Network";

Atkinson, "The War Economy in Liberia";

Reno, "Foreign Firms and the Financing of Charles Taylor's NPFL";

Chella, "The Complicity of Multinational Corporations in International Crimes";

Global Witness, "Taylor-made";

Ballantine and Nitzsche, "The Political Economy of Civil War";

Duffield, "Globalization, Transborder Trade, and War Economies";

Colin M. Waugh, *Charles Taylor and Liberia: Ambition and Atrocity in Africa's Lone Star State* (Zed Books: London, 2011).

¹³² Lipman, "Charles Taylor's Criminal Network";

Kanagaretnam and Brown, *Business, Conflict, and Peacebuilding*;

Jonathon M. Winer and Trifin J. Roule, "Follow the Money: The Finance of Illicit Resource Extraction," in *Natural Resources and Violent Conflict: Options and Actions*, ed. Ian Bannon and Paul Collier (Washington, DC: The World Bank, Washington, 2003);

David Shearer, "Aiding or Abetting?";

Global Witness, "Logging Off";

Global Witness, "Taylor-made."

4.2. Firestone and the Liberian Civil War

The release of the PBS documentary, *Firestone and the Warlord*, in 2014 generated a fair amount of interest in the media and from NGOs in the Firestone Liberia case study.¹³³ The academic literature is very thin in comparison and research revealed no systematic analysis of the case study. The rebel-centric approach in the literature on the Liberian war economy is reflected in the ongoing discussion about Firestone's behaviour during the conflict. Attention is particularly focused on the relationship between Firestone and Charles Taylor, or more broadly his NPFL and NPRAG.¹³⁴ This is despite evidence that Firestone at first hedged its bets by engaging with all prominent actors in the conflict before entering into an agreement with Taylor's NPRAG. Emphasis is mostly on the way in which the company's financial transactions with the rebels and its on-the-ground operations and logistical support aided Taylor in his military campaigns.¹³⁵

The United Steelworkers of America compiled a report that addresses the agreement between Firestone and Taylor. The report asserts that the agreement to do business with the warlord "indirectly and perhaps directly contributed to mass death and destruction in Liberia, and prolonged the civil war".¹³⁶ The report was written for the purpose of swaying BFS during the union's negotiations in 1996 and thus likely adopted a rebel-centric approach in order to frame the company in a negative light. As such,

¹³³ Gaviria, *Firestone and the Warlord*;

Neil Genzlinger, "Bodies Pile Up, but Business Goes On: 'Firestone and the Warlord' Looks at Liberia," *The New York Times*, November 17, 2014, accessed September 12, 2017,

<https://www.nytimes.com/2014/11/18/arts/television/firestone-and-the-warlord-looks-at-liberia.html>;

David Leveille, "A New Investigation into Firestone's Rubber Plantation Sheds Light on Liberia's Civil War," *PRI*, November 18, 2014, accessed September 12, 2017, <https://www.pri.org/stories/2014-11-18/new-investigation-firestones-rubber-plantation-sheds-light-liberias-civil-war>;

Erica Fry, "When Companies Do Business with Warlords," *Fortune*, November 19, 2014, accessed September 12, 2017, <http://fortune.com/2014/11/19/doing-business-with-warlords/>;

Dimitra DeFotis, "Investing in Africa: How Firestone Tapped Rubber in a War Zone," *Barron's*, November 19, 2014, accessed September 13, 2017, <https://www.barrons.com/articles/investing-in-africa-how-firestone-tapped-rubber-in-a-war-zone-1416418742>;

John Doyle, "What Firestone did in Liberia for 'Profit, Profit, Profit'," *The Globe and Mail*, November 17, 2014, accessed September 13, 2017, <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/arts/television/john-doyle-what-firestone-did-in-liberia-for-profit-profit-profit/article21619367/>.

¹³⁴ United Steelworkers of America, "Preliminary Report";

Gaviria, *Firestone and the Warlord*;

Reno, "Foreign Firms and the Financing of Charles Taylor's NPFL";

Rosenau et al., *Corporations and Counterinsurgency*;

Atkinson, "The War Economy in Liberia."

¹³⁵ United Steelworkers of America. "Preliminary Report";

William Reno, "How Sovereignty Matters: International Markets and the Political Economy of Local Politics in Weak States," in *Intervention and Transnationalism in Africa: Global-Local Networks of Power*, ed. Thomas Callaghy, Ronald Kassimir and Robert Latham (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 203;

Gaviria, *Firestone and the Warlord*;

Reno, "Foreign Firms and the Financing of Charles Taylor's NPFL";

Atkinson, "The War Economy in Liberia."

¹³⁶ United Steelworkers of America, "Preliminary Report," 3.

caution was taken in using this report as reliable knowledge. In a study commissioned by the RAND Corporation, Rosenau et al. also investigate the role played by Firestone in the Liberian conflict. The authors quote Haufler's statement that even the unintentional actions of MNCs "can reinforce the dominance of particular elites or ethnic groups [and] change the local balance of power". They argue that the company impacted conflict dynamics "through alleged protection payments to government officials and armed groups and through the provision of sanctuary to threatened civilian populations".¹³⁷

Reno investigates more closely the ways in which Firestone might have facilitated Taylor's military campaigns. He observes that Firestone's rubber operations provided Taylor with millions in "tax" payments, while allowing (or being forced to allow) NPFL access to the plantation provided them with necessary war materiel and other resources..¹³⁸ In addition, he points out that Firestone, under the cover of foreign aid, brought rice in to Liberia that was subsequently given to feed Taylor's troops as a "cost of doing business".¹³⁹ Reno argues that Firestone likely calculated (or rather miscalculated) that the insurgency would quickly "assume the mantle of sovereignty" in Liberia, explaining the company's decision to collaborate with Taylor.¹⁴⁰ In her study, Atkinson points out that Firestone management made arrangements with various factional leaders to secure protection during the Liberian Civil War. Specifically, she mentions the allegation that the company paid Taylor's NPFL in excess of US\$2 million just for protection.

Section 5 | Chapter Summary

The existing literature on the role of MNCs in conflict is situated within the broader debate about the political economy of civil war and the role of resources in sustaining conflict, more specifically. However, many of these studies are very general in nature and focus predominantly on the link between diamonds and oil, and the big-name companies in the conflicts in Sierra Leone, Angola and DRC. There is also widespread appeal for MNCs to act "responsibly" in conflict situations, which ranges from calls for companies to "do no harm", to those that envisage a role for private actors in peacekeeping and post-conflict reconstruction activities. However, there remains a significant gap between the rhetoric of responsible business practices in conflict and the

¹³⁷ Rosenau et al., *Corporations and Counterinsurgency*, 23.

¹³⁸ Reno, "How Sovereignty Matters," 203.

¹³⁹ Reno, "Chapter 4 Liberia."

¹⁴⁰ Reno, "How Sovereignty Matters," 204.

reality on the ground. There is a noted tendency in both the academic studies and NGO reports to emphasise the negative consequences of MNC activities on conflict dynamics. Inherent in this is the presumption that a clear distinction exists between the “good”, “bad” and “worst” actors in the conflict. However, in reality, this is often not the case and this study seeks to highlight this through the Firestone Liberia case study.

Moreover, insufficient attention has been paid to the “dynamic constellation of independent variables”¹⁴¹ that affects corporate strategies in conflict zones. In addition, more focus needs to be placed on the geo-economic and geo-political significance of the operations of MNCs in conflict situations. This is surprising given the fairly broad recognition that many resource-reliant MNCs choose to continue operating in conflict zones. Some scholars, such as Patey and Nelson, do recognise that foreign business actors can find themselves drawn into conflict as a result of the resources and infrastructure offered at the sites’ operations.¹⁴² However, little strategic analysis has been done on the influence that this geo-economic and geo-political significance has on the agency and choices available to foreign business actors.

With regards to the case study specifically, insufficient attention has been paid to the influence of the conflict’s characteristics on Firestone Liberia’s choices during the first civil war. While the evidence shows that the violence of the Liberian conflict was particularly brutal and shocking, there is a lack of recognition of the impact that this, as well as Liberia’s cultural structure, had on the company’s agency during the conflict. Moreover, since the release of the *Firestone and the Warlord* documentary in 2014, Firestone has been publicly criticised for its actions during the Liberian Civil War. However, there is a considerable lack of academic research on the details of this relationship, despite the availability of key primary sources. What literature does exist is critical of Firestone’s strategy, and typically conflates cause and consequence by contending that this strategy was informed by profit-seeking aspirations. As such, this study uses both primary and secondary resources to conduct an in-depth investigation into Firestone Liberia’s behaviour during the civil war.

¹⁴¹ Patey, *A Complex Reality*, 51.

¹⁴² Patey, *A Complex Reality*;
Nelson, *The Business of Peace*, 84.

CHAPTER THREE

Section 1 | Factors to the First Liberian Civil War

In order to analyse the decisions made by Firestone Liberia during the civil war, an investigation of the factors that contributed to the outbreak and nature of the conflict is necessary. An exploration of Liberia's history reveals the development of a political culture of predation and selfishness, which both influenced and infiltrated the character of the conflict that began in 1989. Moreover, an understanding of the regional and international dynamics of the conflict gives context to the outbreak of the conflict as well as the complex of actors involved. These dimensions are vital components to understanding the development of Firestone's relationship with the Liberian state as well as the context within which it operated during the conflict.

1.1. The Historical Context

1.1.1. The Arrival of the American Settlers

The modern Liberian state owes its origins to the arrival of a group of freed slaves who were repatriated following America's transition from a slave-based economy to a capitalist system.¹⁴³ The African-American settlers who arrived on the shores of Monrovia in 1822 never constituted more than five per cent of the population of the small West African state.¹⁴⁴ From the beginning, the settlers' interactions with the indigenous population were guided by their belief in the religious superiority of Christianity and their self-proclaimed duty to Christianise and civilise the locals according to Western standards.¹⁴⁵ In order to distinguish themselves from the locals, they wore Western clothing, built houses designed in the architectural style of the American south, and named places and streets after key American figures and places (Monrovia was named after US President John Monroe).¹⁴⁶ The attitude of the settlers

¹⁴³ George Klay Kieh Jr, "Neo-Colonialism: American Foreign Policy and the First Liberian Civil War." *The Journal of Pan African Studies*, vol. 5, no. 1 (March 2012), 168, <http://www.jpanafrican.org/docs/vol5no1/5.1NeoColonialism.pdf>;

Henry Noble Sherwood "The Formation of the American Colonization Society," *The Journal of Negro History*, vol. 2, no. 3 (July 1917), 226–227, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2713765>.

¹⁴⁴ Jonny Steinberg, *Little Liberia: An African Odyssey in New York City* (New York: Random House, 2011), 36.

¹⁴⁵ Dr Samuel K. Ngaima, Sr, *Factors in the Liberian National Conflict: Views of the Liberian Expatriates* (Xlibris, 2014), 20,

¹⁴⁶ Ngaima, *Factors in the Liberian National Conflict*, 18.

and their visible contempt for local cultures, religions and ways of life set the stage for the systematic exclusion of indigenous Liberians under Americo-Liberian rule.¹⁴⁷

1.1.2. The Implementation of Indirect Rule

At first, interactions between the settlers and the indigenous population were limited as the Americo-Liberians built their lives along the Monrovia coast and rarely ventured into the indigenously populated interior.¹⁴⁸ However, formal government control over the interior was extended in 1904 at the behest of President Arthur Barclay. The Barclay Plan, as it was known, involved the implementation of a colonial-style policy of indirect rule to administer the hinterland. The interior was divided into districts using pre-existing traditional power structures to establish a two-tiered system of “paramount chiefs” and “town chiefs” in each.¹⁴⁹ The government also appointed district commissioners who were sent to the Liberian interior to command the chiefs, thereby establishing an administrative hierarchy with the state at the apex.¹⁵⁰ The implementation of indirect rule was accompanied by increased taxation of the indigenous population as a means for the government to accrue revenue. Citizens of the hinterland were forced to pay far more burdensome taxes than the Americo-Liberian population. For example, through the levying of a hut tax on the indigenous population, the state accrued US\$300 000 in 1925, while the main tax levied on the Americo-Liberians (the property tax) brought in under US\$5 000 in the same year.¹⁵¹

While the Barclay Plan extended citizenship to include indigenous Liberians for the first time, political integration of the indigenous population was largely superficial.¹⁵² The government was thus forced to rely on intimidation and violent repression, rather than the consent of the majority, to rule.¹⁵³ In order to maintain control over the hinterland districts, the government formed a standing army known as the Liberian Frontier Force (LFF) that was deployed to the interior as a:

¹⁴⁷ Dulce Foster et al., *A House with Two Rooms: Final Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Liberia Diaspora Project* (St Paul, Minnesota: DRI Press, 2009), 60.

¹⁴⁸ Ellis, *The Mask of Anarchy*, 37.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 41.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 46.

¹⁵² Gerdes, “The Evolution of the Liberian State,” 27.

¹⁵³ Heneryatta Ballah and Clemente Abrokwa, “Ethnicity, Politics and Social Conflict: The Quest for Peace in Liberia,” *Penn State McNair Journal*, vol. 10 (2003), 56, <http://forms.gradsch.psu.edu/diversity/mcnair/2003/ballah.pdf>.

way of flexing the military muscle of the republic, of intimidating the indigenous people, and of cutting them off from the sources of their revenue through the application of force in the conduct of trade.¹⁵⁴

Members of the LFF did not receive regular salaries from the government and soon adopted a marauding mentality. Recruits expropriated local resources, raped and sexually enslaved women, torched villages, and forcibly conscripted young men into their forces.¹⁵⁵ The LFF was routinely used an instrument of coercion by the chiefs to force local men to pay their annual hut tax and, in turn, district commissioners made use of the LFF to punish chiefs if they failed to meet their annual tax quota.¹⁵⁶ This led to the formation of a system of control that operated through the use of intimidation and violence at all levels of power and was based on a military culture of ruthless commandeering.¹⁵⁷ The LFF was renamed the Armed Forces of Liberia (AFL) in 1962 and its history as an instrument of state power abuse by the state continued into the post-Americo-Liberian era.¹⁵⁸

1.1.3. The Impact of President Tubman

The policy of indirect rule was formally superseded in 1944 with the inauguration of President William Tubman's unification policy, which developed into his policy of integration in 1964.¹⁵⁹ These policies were supposedly driven by the government's recognition of the need to integrate the indigenous population politically, socially, legally and economically.¹⁶⁰ However, the policies suffered from a lack of genuine commitment and Tubman instead carried on the tradition of his predecessors by filling state positions with his own cronies. Through his economic Open Door Policy, which offered incentives such as duty-free privileges and tax holidays to foreign investors, Tubman was able to attract significant FDI to Liberia and generate substantial revenue to turn Liberia into a truly neopatrimonial one-party state.¹⁶¹ Tubman also amended the

¹⁵⁴ James Campbell quoted in Steinberg, *Little Liberia*, 45.

¹⁵⁵ Steinberg, *Little Liberia*, 45.

¹⁵⁶ Jairo Munive, "A Political Economic History of the Liberian State, Forced Labour and Armed Mobilization," *Journal of Agrarian Change*, vol. 11, no. 3 (July 2011), 360, DOI: 10.1111/j.1471-0366.2011.00310.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid.

¹⁵⁸ Ministry of National Defense, "A Brief History of the AFL," accessed September 10, 2017, <http://mod.gov.lr/the-forces/brief-history-of-afl/>.

¹⁵⁹ Quentin Outram, "Liberia: Roots and Fruits of the Emergency," *Third World Quarterly*, vol. 20, no. 1 (1999): 164, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3993188>.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid.

¹⁶¹ Gerdes, "The Evolution of the Liberian State," 32;

constitution to allow for the president to be in power for one eight-year term followed by successive four-year terms. His violent repression of opposition to the amendment was argued to be the “the modern genesis of a culture of political intolerance and witch-hunting in Liberia”.¹⁶² In addition, his three decades as president solidified in Liberian politics the partisan use of democratic institutions, political control of security forces, and the libellous destruction of property and taking of lives. As a result, Tubman’s regime has been accused of birthing a “political culture that would nurture future wars”.¹⁶³

Tubman’s successor, William Tolbert, pledged to liberalise Liberia’s political space and to find a balance between economic development and social equity.¹⁶⁴ However, Tolbert routinely failed to balance the demands of the growing political appetite of the indigenous population with the historical ideals of his conservative constituents.¹⁶⁵ Like his predecessors, Tolbert soon resorted to the use of violent repression to quell public dissent and political opposition.¹⁶⁶ Eventually, in 1979, after 130 years of alienation and gross injustice suffered under Americo-Liberian rule, the indigenous population pushed back.

1.1.4. Political Structure and Culture under Americo-Liberian Rule

Liberia’s class structure under Americo-Liberian rule was divided between a distinct and exclusive minority and the broader indigenous population. The Americo-Liberian minority dominated the political arena (as well as the economic, cultural and social spheres) and established political structures influenced by the American model. These structures included a bicameral legislature and the division of state power between the legislative, executive and judiciary.¹⁶⁷ While the political structures that were established included democratic characteristics, these served merely as channels through which the elite organised its control over the Liberian state. In reality, politics was conducted outside of formal channels and was dominated by the Americo-Liberian oligarchy, which collectively wielded significant power over all three branches of

Kieh, “Neo-Colonialism,” 170.

¹⁶² TRC, *Volume II: Consolidated Final Report*, 90.

¹⁶³ Ibid.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid, 99.

¹⁶⁵ Ellis, “Liberia 1989–1994,” 175.

¹⁶⁶ Kieh, “Neo-Colonialism,” 177.

¹⁶⁷ Earl Conteh-Morgan and Shireen Kadivar, “Ethnopolitical Violence in the Liberian Civil War,” *The Journal of Conflict Studies*, vol. 15, no. 1 (1995), 8, <https://journals.lib.unb.ca/index.php/JCS/article/viewFile/4593/5434>.

government. This group included the president and his presidential cabinet, influential members of the legislative, and other notable Americo-Liberian individuals.¹⁶⁸

Thus, while the political structure implemented by the Americo-Liberians imitated that of the American system, political culture in Liberia lacked genuine democratic norms and principles.¹⁶⁹ The True Whig Party, which acted as the Americo-Liberian instrument of political control, held a monopoly of power from 1847 until the 1980 coup d'état. While elections were held periodically, electoral officials and registrars were either selected by the president or from within the ruling party.¹⁷⁰ Positions in office were appointed according to personal loyalties and social connections rather than expertise or suitability for the job in office. Once established, the political culture was one of abusing office for private gain, a culture pervasive in the military as well.¹⁷¹ In fact, corruption under Americo-Liberian rule became so endemic and permissive that it became a culturally accepted, even respected, practice to use one's position in government to steal public resources for personal gain.¹⁷² The system was developed over consecutive Americo-Liberian-led political regimes, each of which contributed towards the continued entrenchment of norms of corruption and misappropriation, as well as the centralisation of wealth and power in the political sphere.

According to the report by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) of Liberia, "these entrenched aspects of life in Liberia exacerbated behaviour during the civil conflict".¹⁷³ In addition, the absence of a democratic political culture, coupled with the Americo-Liberians' abuse of the political structure for self-enrichment, established a societal belief that change could only occur in Liberia through the use of force. This became evident in the 1980 violent overthrow of government and the subsequent reprisal attacks committed by those who had been victims of the unjust and exclusionary Americo-Liberian political system.¹⁷⁴

¹⁶⁸ Gerdes, "The Evolution of the Liberian State," 22.

¹⁶⁹ Conteh-Morgan and Kadivar, "Ethnopolitical Violence in the Liberian Civil War," 12.

¹⁷⁰ Gerdes, "The Evolution of the Liberian State," 22.

¹⁷¹ Gerdes, *Civil War and State Formation*, 33.

¹⁷² TRC, *Volume II: Consolidated Final Report*, 5.

¹⁷³ Ibid, 6.

¹⁷⁴ Outram, "Liberia: Roots and Fruits of the Emergency," 166.

1.2. The Doe Dictatorship

A group of junior army officers of indigenous backgrounds eventually ended Americo-Liberian rule in 1980 through a coup d'état. The small group of soldiers entered the Executive Mansion in Monrovia on 12 April, led by Samuel Doe, killing members of staff and eventually President Tolbert himself. By dawn, Doe had proclaimed that "133 years of Americo-Liberian rule were over".¹⁷⁵ Tolbert's mutilated body and those of his dead staff members were paraded through the capital's streets in a brutal display of Americo-Liberian defeat. A group of mostly cabinet ministers were displayed on the beach in chains and shot by firing squad, and the houses of the overthrown elite were destroyed.¹⁷⁶ At the time, the overthrow of power was typically achieved with limited violence, but Doe's coup was particularly brutal and bloody.

In the ashes of the Americo-Liberian system, the People's Redemption Council (PRC) was established with Master Sergeant Samuel Doe as council chair.¹⁷⁷ Doe's promise was to return Liberia to the indigenous peoples and he initially enjoyed widespread support. In keeping with his pledge to "liberate" Liberia's indigenous population, Doe eliminated (by execution or enforced exile) all those identified as the elites of the Americo-Liberian regime.¹⁷⁸ However, Doe's brutality soon extended to include any individuals or groups identified by him as being a threat to his hold on power. His targets ranged from those who held positions in office and the military, as well as students and journalists, among others.¹⁷⁹ In the places of those politicians and military men he forcibly removed or executed, Doe placed members of his own ethnicity, Krahn, who constituted roughly five per cent of the Liberian population.¹⁸⁰

1.2.1. The Politicisation of Ethnicity

Historically, the Liberian state had been used by those in power as a source of personal enrichment and Doe's administration continued in this vein.¹⁸¹ As Jonny Steinberg asserts, "the president's office was a trough at which various constituencies came to

¹⁷⁵ Steinberg, *Little Liberia*, 59.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷⁷ Williams, *Liberia: The Heart of Darkness*, 23.

¹⁷⁸ Adekeye Adebajo, *Liberia's Civil War: Nigeria, ECOMOG, and Regional Security in West Africa* (London: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2002), 20.

¹⁷⁹ Ibid.

¹⁸⁰ Ellis, "Liberia 1989-1994," 177.

¹⁸¹ Ellis, "Liberia 1989-1994," 176.

feed”.¹⁸² In order to safeguard his power, Doe politicised ethnic relations by selectively rewarding the Krahn (and the Mandingo, although to a lesser extent) with political and military positions and with access to economic goods. Over his tenure, other ethnic groups became progressively marginalised as economic and political opportunities became tied to ethnic affiliations. However, this put a higher premium on staying in power as such exclusionary ethnonationalist policies often result in violent reprisals once power changes hands.¹⁸³ The more Doe ethnicised the political sphere, the more paranoid he became about losing power, leading him increasingly to deal “with real and imagined threats with seemingly whimsical violence”.¹⁸⁴ Doe’s exclusionary ethnonationalist policies gave rise to group grievances and created a large, multi-ethnic group of dissidents. As a result, Charles Taylor – the son of an Americo-Liberian father and an indigenous mother – was able to bring together the Mano and Gio from Nimba County, along with members of the Americo-Liberians in the diaspora, to create a formidable enemy.¹⁸⁵

While the politicisation of ethnicity did not affect Firestone’s strategy specifically, it did lead to a conflict fought along ethnic lines defined by a continuous pattern of ethnic reprisal. It also meant that peace negotiations were continuously hampered by a conflict whose outcome was zero-sum.¹⁸⁶

1.2.2. The Legacy of Thomas Quiwonkpa

In the first five years of his political tenure, Doe found his greatest rival in Thomas Quiwonkpa, a Gio originally from Nimba County.¹⁸⁷ Quiwonkpa had been involved alongside Doe in the 1980 overthrow of the Americo-Liberian government and was appointed the position of commanding general of the AFL after the PRC’s victory. Quiwonkpa was an ethnic Gio originally from Nimba County and he contributed significantly towards the ethnicisation of the AFL by cultivating strong ties with Gio and Mano rank-and-file soldiers.¹⁸⁸ At the same time, Doe was replacing top-ranking military

¹⁸² Steinberg, *Little Liberia*, 64.

¹⁸³ Julian Wucherpfennig et al., “Ethnicity, the State, and the Duration of Civil War,” *World Politics*, vol. 64, no. 1 (January 2012): 93, DOI: 10.1017/S004388711100030X.

¹⁸⁴ Steinberg, “Little Liberia,” 63.

¹⁸⁵ TRC, *Volume II: Consolidated Final Report*, 117.

¹⁸⁶ Christopher Tuck, “Every Car or Moving Object Gone: The ECOMOG Intervention in Liberia,” *African Studies Quarterly*, vol. 4, no.1 (Spring 2000): 2–3, https://asq.africa.ufl.edu/tuck_spring00/.

¹⁸⁷ Gerdes, “The Evolution of the Liberian State,” 41.

¹⁸⁸ Ellis, “Liberia 1989–1994,” 178.

men and political officials with members of his own ethnicity, the Krahn.¹⁸⁹ As the personal rivalry developed between the two men, Doe formed an allegiance with the Mandingo – an ethnic group of Muslim faith that had enjoyed certain privileges under Americo-Liberian rule.¹⁹⁰ The antagonism between Doe and Quiwonkpa soon permeated the armed forces, pitting their respective ethnic constituencies against one another.¹⁹¹ As tensions heightened in 1983, Quiwonkpa and a number of his loyalists fled into exile and began planning a campaign to overthrow Doe.¹⁹²

After taking his position as council chair in 1980, Doe suspended Liberia's democratic institutions for the first time in the republic's history.¹⁹³ However, as his legitimacy eroded, the need to lend credence to his authority grew increasingly pressing. Quiwonkpa's exile gave Doe the opportunity to acquiesce to mounting US pressure to institute civilian rule in Liberia. He quickly constructed his own political party, using his control over state resources to buy support for the elections and to fund his electoral campaigns.¹⁹⁴ In spite of this, Doe was unable to secure a victory and rigged the results to award himself a 51 per cent majority in the 1985 elections.¹⁹⁵ Following the fraudulent elections, Quiwonkpa returned to Liberia from Sierra Leone to stage a coup with a group of former AFL soldiers loyal to him.¹⁹⁶ On reaching Monrovia, Quiwonkpa used the national radio station to announce that he and what he called his National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL) had seized control of the capital city.

However, Doe had been warned of the impending insurgency by officials from the US Embassy in Monrovia, giving him sufficient time to summon military reinforcements to re-establish his control over the capital.¹⁹⁷ Quiwonkpa was killed and his mutilated corpse was paraded through Monrovia as a sign of the public brutality that was to follow. Gio and Mano civilians, especially those in Nimba County, were subjected to exceptional savagery at the hands of Doe's AFL as a form of collective punishment for Quiwonkpa's actions.¹⁹⁸ While the 1985 coup failed and the consequences were brutal for select ethnic groups, Quiwonkpa left behind a significant legacy: the NPFL. While the

¹⁸⁹ Gerdes, "The Evolution of the Liberian State," 41–44.

¹⁹⁰ Gerdes, "The Evolution of the Liberian State," 43.

¹⁹¹ Ellis, "Liberia 1989–1994", 178.

¹⁹² Steinberg, *Little Liberia*, 65;

Gerdes, "The Evolution of the Liberian State," 42.

¹⁹³ Ellis, *The Mask of Anarchy*.

¹⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 58.

¹⁹⁵ Gerdes, "The Evolution of the Liberian State," 42.

¹⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 43.

¹⁹⁷ Ellis, *The Mask of Anarchy*, 60.

¹⁹⁸ Ellis, "Liberia 1989–1994", 178.

NPFL had little formal structure until 1989, Quiwonkpa had formed the military faction that would oust Doe in 1989 and initiate 14 years of violent conflict.¹⁹⁹

1.2.3. Political Structure and Culture under Doe's Regime

Doe's initial claim to power relied heavily on the ideological justification that he had liberated the Liberian people through the 1980 revolution.²⁰⁰ However, the legitimacy of this claim faded as Doe increasingly resorted to the brutal use of military force and ethnic patronage to defend his position in power.²⁰¹²⁰² Essentially, Liberia experienced no radical political, economic or social restructuring under the Doe regime and widespread public opinion of the new government was "same taxi, different driver".²⁰³ However, his introduction of exclusionary ethnic policies deviated from the Americo-Liberian regimes who had relied more on class structure as a strategy for rule. Doe's time in power resulted in the politicisation and divisive clustering of Liberia's different ethnic groups, which had a significant impact on the conflict that broke out following the 1989 insurgency.

The historic absence of a genuine democratic political culture in Liberia was not only perpetuated but arguably aggravated during Doe's decade of power. Doe was not interested in the technical issues of running a state; instead, he used the power that came with the presidency to build ethnic alliances which, in turn, he used to protect his power.²⁰⁴ In addition, Doe accrued revenue by granting concessions to foreign businesses that relied on him for commercial opportunities. Through legal and illegal payments made by these companies, Doe was able to sustain his patronage network and buy local support. Doe also accrued revenue through the receipt of US aid in a manner not dissimilar from the income the previous government had earned through the economic Open Door Policy.²⁰⁵ As such, Doe did not have to rely on democratic measures to ensure the continuation of his political career. According to Amos Sawyer, Liberia under Doe was characterised by "six years of rape and plunder by armed

¹⁹⁹ Ellis, "Liberia 1989–1994", 180.

²⁰⁰ Adebajo, *Liberia's Civil War*, 20;

Ellis, *The Mask of Anarchy*, 64.

²⁰¹ Gerdes, "The Evolution of the Liberian State," 40.

²⁰² Ellis, *The Mask of Anarchy*, 64.

²⁰³ Outram, "Liberia: Roots and Fruits of the Emergency," 167.

²⁰⁴ Ellis, "Liberia 1989–1994", 177.

²⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 64;

Kieh, "Neo-Colonialism," 174,

marauders whose ideology [was] to search for cash and whose ambition [was] to retain power to accumulate and protect wealth”.²⁰⁶

1.2.4. The End of the Doe Dictatorship

Doe’s progressively exclusionary ethnonationalist policies greatly diminished his support base and created widespread societal grievances.²⁰⁷ By 1990, Doe had reportedly survived no fewer than 38 coup attempts against his government and his own life.²⁰⁸ Attempts to usurp power through the violent defeat of authority spread beyond the political sphere and infiltrated almost all aspects of Liberian society. From universities to sports clubs, no structure was safe and governing bodies and committees were routinely overthrown. As Jonny Steinberg illustrates, “every sphere of life, no matter how petty, was organised around a centre of power, and centres of power could be stormed, their personnel driven into the wilderness”.²⁰⁹ In the political sphere and in society more broadly, power went to the most ruthless and brutal, to those who were prepared to take with force. This was made evident by the particularly bloody and brutal 1980 coup and would once again be seen in the violence that erupted in December 1989.

This pattern of political predation and selfishness was perpetuated and exacerbated during the civil war. Both Taylor’s de facto government and the interim government established by ECOMOG suffered from predatory tendencies and egocentric ambitions, meaning that whomever Firestone Liberia dealt with was likely to be corrupt and repressive. As such, Liberia’s cultural structure significantly limited the choices available to foreign business actors.

1.3. The Influence of International and Regional Factors

Although the First Liberian Civil War has often been approached as an intrastate conflict, regional and international dimensions contributed significantly to the onset and character of the conflict.

²⁰⁶ Amos Sawyer, *Effective Immediately: Dictatorship in Liberia 1980–1986: A Personal Perspective* (Liberia Working Group Paper No. 5, Liberia Working Group: Bremen, 1987): 5, quoted in Ellis, “Liberia 1989–1994,” 176.

²⁰⁷ Ellis, *The Mask of Anarchy*, 64.

²⁰⁸ Ibid, 63.

²⁰⁹ Steinberg, *Little Liberia*, 55.

1.3.1. International Factors

While Samuel Doe lacked experience in the intricacies of politics, he soon learnt that he could protect his position in Liberia by adopting a pro-American line in foreign affairs.²¹⁰ In spite of Doe's blatant transgressions as president, Cold War tactics drove the US to maintain financial and military support for its West African stronghold throughout the 1980s.²¹¹ Doe was able to suppress US concerns about his handling of state affairs by simply making "vague promises of reform",²¹² evidenced by official US endorsement of the fraudulent 1985 elections. However, the danger of relying so heavily on America as a patron became apparent in 1988 when official US support for Doe was withdrawn.²¹³ The abrupt cutting off of crucial resources from the US severely weakened Doe's regime by undercutting his ability to fulfil patronage obligations and counterbalance Liberian strongmen.²¹⁴

American-Libyan tensions over Liberia also played a critical role in the impending 1989 insurgency. In the early 1980s, the US was concerned about Colonel Muammar Gaddafi's aspiration to build a pan-Islamic African federation in Africa, as well as his close ties to the Soviet Union and his support for a number of groups identified by the US as terrorists.²¹⁵ To prevent an alliance forming between Liberia and Libya, the US Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs flew to Liberia with US\$10 million to buy Doe's support.²¹⁶ While Doe's decision to adopt a pro-American line in his foreign policy helped buoy his political career in the short term, it also impacted regional dynamics and ultimately contributed towards its demise.

1.3.2. Regional Factors

Gaddafi sought revenge against Doe for favouring an alliance with the US over Libya. He recruited Liberian dissidents who had fled Liberia to neighbouring countries, particularly Burkina Faso, Guinea, Ghana and Sierra Leone, bringing them to Libya for military training. The most significant Liberian contingent that trained in Libya was the

²¹⁰ Ellis, *The Mask of Anarchy*, 55.

²¹¹ Kieh, "Neo-Colonialism," 173.

²¹² Ellis, *The Mask of Anarchy*, 64

²¹³ Reno, *Warlord Politics and African States*, 87.

²¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 88.

²¹⁵ Kenneth Noble, "The United States, Libya and the Liberian Civil War," *The Alicia Patterson Foundation*, May 3, 2011, accessed October 12, 2017, <http://aliciapatterson.org/stories/united-states-libya-and-liberian-civil-war>.

²¹⁶ *Ibid.*

NPFL, led by Charles Taylor.²¹⁷ Taylor's NPFL recruits received training in Libya and his forces were augmented by mercenaries from Burkina Faso and revolutionaries from Sierra Leone and the Gambia.²¹⁸ President Felix Houphouët-Boigny of the Ivory Coast, who had been a close friend of Tolbert, also offered refuge to Liberian exiles and assisted in facilitating the 1989 Taylor insurgency.²¹⁹ The Liberian diaspora in the Ivory Coast was constituted predominantly by Americo-Liberians who had formed allegiances with subsequent waves of Liberian refugees, mostly the Gio and Mano fleeing Nimba County.²²⁰

These regional alliances would eventually impact the structure of the West African peacekeeping force, ECOMOG. Then Nigerian president, Ibrahim Babangida, was a close friend of Doe's and he allegedly provided Doe with weapons and ammunition during the AFL's campaign in Nimba County (which Babangida has denied). Additionally, the 1990 killing of 1 000 Nigerians by Taylor's NPFL likely triggered Babangida's decision to intervene in the Liberian conflict. There was a fear that the Liberian conflict would create a "ripple of instability" in the region and that victory for Taylor might lead Nigeria's regional opponents to use Liberia as a source of aid and support.²²¹ As such, Nigeria took charge of the assemblage of the peacekeeping force known as the Economic Community of West African States Monitoring Group (ECOMOG) that would be dispatched to Liberia in 1990 under the auspices of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS).²²²

1.4. Section Summary

By the end of the 1980s, Liberia's living memory was dominated by mass killings and the flagrant use of terror to assert dominance. The levels of brutality and violence that characterised Liberia's history led to the outbreak of a conflict in late 1989 that was "peculiarly horrible".²²³ According to a witness, the Liberian Civil War exceeded all other wars in terms of its intensity, its savagery, in depravity and in horror.²²⁴ The character of

²¹⁷ Ibid.

²¹⁸ TRC, *Volume II: Consolidated Final Report*, 117; Ellis, "Liberia 1989–1994," 167.

²¹⁹ TRC, *Volume II: Consolidated Final Report*, 117.

²²⁰ Ellis, *The Mask of Anarchy*, 66.

²²¹ Tuck, "Every Car or Moving Object Gone," 5.

²²² Reno, *Warlord Politics and African States*, 93.

²²³ Ellis, "Liberia 1989–1994," 165.

²²⁴ Leonard Brehun, *Liberia: The War of Horror* (Adwinsa Publications: Accra, 1991): 113, quoted in Ellis, "Liberia 1989–1994," 165.

the conflict is a significant factor in understanding the strategic behaviour of Firestone Liberia in the early 1990s as it put the company in a position of extreme vulnerability and severely limited its agency in responding to the conflict. The historical context also reveals the entrenched culture of predation and selfishness in Liberian politics. The implication of this is that whomever Firestone Liberia decided to engage with, they would likely be feeding a regime that was immoral and despotic. Essentially, the line between “good” and “bad” political actors had never been distinct or separate in Liberia’s history, and this was continued and further complicated during the civil war.

In addition, external intervening factors are important in understanding the formation of ECOMOG and the role it played in complicating and aggravating the conflict. Instead of representing a neutral peacekeeping force, ECOMOG was corrupted by bias and distracted by the marauding tendencies of its soldiers. Liberians commonly referred to ECOMOG as “Every Car or Moveable Object Gone” as its soldiers routinely stole from Liberia and shipped the looted goods back home (mostly to Nigeria).²²⁵ In addition, ECOMOG was repeatedly criticised for its disregard for civilian safety, as it regularly besieged suspected NPFL territories with little thought for whatever and whomever resided there.²²⁶ Thus, while the literature on the Liberian Civil War tends to portray ECOMOG (and the interim government) as the “good” and Taylor as the “bad”, this distinction was not nearly so clear-cut in reality. The implication of this narrative was that Firestone Liberia was damned for engaging with Taylor in spite of the reality that no “good” alternative existed. However, this assumption negates the need to inquire into the motivations behind the company’s decisions during the conflict. As mentioned previously, this is a significant gap in the existing literature that this study seeks to fill.

Understanding the background to the First Liberian Civil War and the factors that shaped it is essential for critically examining Firestone’s decision-making and behaviour during this time. As important is an understanding of Firestone’s longstanding relationship with the Liberian state, as well as the evolution of the corporate structure within which Firestone operates.

²²⁵ Tuck, “Every Car or Moving Object Gone.”

²²⁶ Waugh, *Charles Taylor and Liberia*.

Section 2 | Firestone and the Liberian State

2.1. The Historical Context

2.1.1. Liberia's Economic History

In the two decades that followed independence, the Liberian economy grew as a result of high international demand for Liberian resources (such as rubber, coffee and palm oil) produced by indigenous labour and traded by wealthy Liberian merchants. Wealthy Liberians from the upper echelons of the political sphere invested in shipping vessels to capitalise on this demand, leading to the development of a small shipping industry.²²⁷ However, the introduction of the steamship changed the global trading game and Liberian merchants were soon squeezed out of international trade as they lacked the capital to keep up with industrial developments. By the early 20th century, Liberia's trading environment was dominated by highly capitalised foreigners and the economy was almost entirely owned and controlled by foreign commercial houses.²²⁸

When its position as a trading nation plummeted, the Liberian state turned to taxing the indigenous population as well as foreign merchants for commodities that passed through Liberian ports.²²⁹ The government also accumulated revenue through signing concessions with foreign firms for the commercial use of Liberian land and charging companies for recruiting Liberian labour.²³⁰ The concentration of state power in the hands of the Americo-Liberians meant that the "business of governance served the interest of businesses controlled by those families and their networks".²³¹ While special deals were made between the Americo-Liberians and a multitude of foreign firms, the concession agreement signed with the American-based Firestone Tire and Rubber Company (FSTR) in the 1920s was the most significant. Understanding the historic role played by Firestone in Liberia is an integral part of the historical antecedent to the civil conflict.

²²⁷ Gerdes, "The Evolution of the Liberian State," 24.

²²⁸ Steinberg, *Little Liberia*, 44.

²²⁹ To this day, Liberia's popularity as a "flag of convenience" has made its ship registry one of the largest in the world. Ellis, *The Mask of Anarchy*, 22.

²³⁰ Steinberg, *Little Liberia*, 44.

²³¹ TRC, *Volume II: Consolidated Final Report*, 5

2.2. The Origins of Firestone's Liberian Operations

For America, the early 1900s were a time of rapid industrialisation and rubber had become increasingly important in accelerating the process.²³² Unlike the British, who had full control over plants in their Southeast Asian colonies, American companies had no control over the source and supply of the sought-after industrial resource.²³³ The Firestone Tire and Rubber Company sought to break the British monopoly by building up an American rubber industry.²³⁴ In December 1923, Firestone Sr sent rubber experts to Mexico, the Philippines and Liberia to investigate their suitability to "grow American rubber".²³⁵ Firestone Sr decided on Liberia, presenting to his board of directors that, "the indigenous labour supply of Liberia effects a large savings ... In Liberia [the] land costs practically nothing".²³⁶ In addition, Liberia imposed no income tax on profits, no land tax and no import duties on the machinery that would need to be brought in.²³⁷

Although financially ailing, the Liberian government's concession agreement with FSTR was more than just a desperate attempt to prevent bankruptcy. At the time, the spread of colonisation through Africa gave rise to the Americo-Liberian fear that the British and French would encroach on their Liberian territory.²³⁸ A substantial American investment would not only provide the debt-stricken government with much needed income, but would also likely deter European interference in Liberian territory.²³⁹ The concession agreement signed between the Liberian government and the FSTR – and the subsequent royalties received therefrom – enhanced the executive's power and helped preserve Americo-Liberian control over Liberia's territory in its entirety.²⁴⁰ Successive Liberian regimes used the concession agreement as a model for further foreign investments and Liberia's prosperity increasingly came to rely on the success of these investments.²⁴¹

²³² Rosenau et al., *Corporations and Counterinsurgency*, 17.

²³³ Harp, *A World History of Rubber*, 96.

²³⁴ Bridgestone Americas, Inc., "Corporation: History."

²³⁵ Harp, *A World History of Rubber*, 96.

²³⁶ Ibid., 97.

²³⁷ Ibid.

²³⁸ Munive, "A Political Economic History of the Liberian State," 360.

²³⁹ *The Memoirs of C. L. Simpson*, *The Symbol of Liberia* (London, 1961): 1411, quoted in Frank Chalk, "The Anatomy of an Investment: Firestone's 1927 Loan to Liberia," *Canadian Journal of African Studies/Revue Canadienne des Études Africaines*, vol. 1, no. 1 (March 1967): 13, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/483972>.

²⁴⁰ Ellis, *The Mask of Anarchy*, 45.

²⁴¹ Chalk, "The Anatomy of an Investment," 13.

2.3. The Concession Agreement

The concession agreement entailed a 99-year lease on up to 1 million acres of land at an annual rent of five cents per acre for the first six years of operations.²⁴² After these six years, rent would be charged at 10 cents per acre and a revenue tax of 2.5 per cent would be paid on the value of all products exported. As part of the agreement, the Liberian government accepted a loan of US\$5 million from the Finance Corporation of America (FCA), a wholly owned subsidiary of FSTR.²⁴³ The loan entailed a significant loss of sovereignty for Liberia as its stringent conditions granted the FCA full control over Liberia's finances until the repayment was settled.²⁴⁴ Thus, to prevent European colonisation and address its financial troubles, the Liberian government chose "the lesser evil – that of veiled economic dominance by a company belonging to a traditionally friendly company".²⁴⁵

The Firestone Natural Rubber Company (FSNR) was established in 1926 as a subsidiary of FSTR and was charged with controlling the plantation from its headquarters in North America, while its own subsidiary, the Firestone Plantations Company (FPCO or "Firestone"), executed operations on the ground.²⁴⁶ The FSNR maintained central command over decision-making and operations on the plantations and kept in close communication via radio.²⁴⁷ In order to establish a rubber production industry in Liberia, engineers were brought in by Firestone to build roads and bridges. In addition, the company contributed much-needed social development by building a modern hospital, setting up a telephone system and providing sanitation to nearby villages.²⁴⁸ Both estates produced their own timber, tiles, bricks, soap, stone and latex cups, all of

²⁴² The acreage of the lease was later decreased to 160 000 acres – 20 000 of which came to constitute a plantation in Cavalla and the remaining 140 000 the plantation in Harbel.

Chalk, "The Anatomy of an Investment";

Daniel E. Lee and Elizabeth J. Lee, *Human Rights and the Ethics of Globalisation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 121.

²⁴³ Chalk, "The Anatomy of an Investment," 30.

²⁴⁴ Ruth Rempel, "Colonialism and Development in Africa," in *The Palgrave Handbook of African Colonial and Postcolonial History*, ed. Martin S. Shanguhya and Toyin Falola (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), https://doi.org/10.1057/978-1-137-59426-6_582.

²⁴⁵ Clarence Simpson, a senior Liberian official, quoted in Chalk, "The Anatomy of an Investment," 12–13.

²⁴⁶ Bergman, "The Alien Tort Statute."

²⁴⁷ Louis T. Wells, "The Multinational Business Enterprise: What Kind of International Organization?" *International Organization*, vol. 25, no. 3 (Summer 1971), 457, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2706050>; Rempel, "Colonialism and Development in Africa," 582.

²⁴⁸ Peter Duignan and L.H. Gann, *The United States and Africa: A History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 220.

which were supplied by stores established for plantation employees. Eventually, these stores were opened up to the broader Liberian public.²⁴⁹

2.3.1. Firestone and the Supply of Labour

The concession agreement also explicitly stated the government's responsibility to "encourage, support, and assist the efforts of Firestone to secure and maintain an adequate labour supply".²⁵⁰ While Firestone Sr had stressed the advantage of cheap labour supply to his board of directors, no national labour market existed in Liberia at the time.²⁵¹ However, the government had enforced involuntary labour since the late 19th century, and this practice continued into the 1900s following the implementation of indirect rule.²⁵² Many government officials and politicians were involved in rubber production in Liberia and thus desired to keep wages in the sector low to ensure higher profits. While the financial burden inflicted on adult indigenous men by the hut tax forced many to engage in pecuniary economic activities, poor wages on the rubber plantations made the sector relatively unappealing to those seeking work. As such, the government relied on the recruitment of forced labour to supply the plantations with workers.²⁵³ On numerous occasions, the Americo-Liberian government used the state as a vehicle for enforcing labour, suppressing strikes and keeping wages low to benefit the "external wing of the Liberian ruling class",²⁵⁴ which included the likes of Firestone's owners. In return for the labour supplied, the company paid half a cent to the chiefs, half a cent to the district commissioner and one cent to the government for each day of work.²⁵⁵

In 1930, this system of forced labour became the topic of a League of Nations investigation, which found the use of forced labour by the Liberian government to be analogous to slavery.²⁵⁶ In response, Firestone Jr launched a public relations campaign to protect the company's reputation as one that had "brought a new day of hope and

²⁴⁹ R. J. Harrison Church, "The Firestone Rubber Plantations in Liberia," *Geography*, vol. 54, no. 4 (November 1969), 430, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4056714>.

²⁵⁰ Article II of the Act establishing the Firestone plantation as quoted in Munive, "A Political Economic History of the Liberian State," 360.

²⁵¹ Munive, "A Political Economic History of the Liberian State," 362.

²⁵² Gerdes, "The Evolution of the Liberian State," 29.

²⁵³ Munive, "A Political Economic History of the Liberian State," 362.

²⁵⁴ George Klay Kieh, *The First Liberian Civil War: The Crises of Underdevelopment* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, Inc., 2008), 57.

²⁵⁵ Munive, "A Political Economic History of the Liberian State," 361.

²⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 362.

advancement”²⁵⁷ to Liberia, while also benefitting American customers. His campaign was delivered in five-minute radio spots and depicted the company as one that provided employment and social welfare to the locals, built infrastructure for the nation and respected local customs.²⁵⁸ However, forced labour continued and, in 1954, Firestone’s labour force was constituted by 16 000 forcibly recruited workers (approximately 80 per cent of the company’s total labour supply). Despite its feudal nature, the system did eventually lead to the creation of a national labour market of wage-earning workers in Liberia and, by the early 1960s, only 20 000 workers out of a total of 80 000 on the plantation were forced recruits, while the rest were voluntary wage-seekers.²⁵⁹ However, allegations of “slave-like” working conditions and the use of child labour have continued to haunt Firestone.²⁶⁰

2.3.2. Firestone and Political Engagement

The rubber plantation economy in Liberia was soon thriving, but only the Americo-Liberian elite reaped the benefits. By the 1950s, Firestone was Liberia’s largest private employer and revenues from rubber concessions constituted almost half of the government’s annual revenue.²⁶¹ Firestone also encouraged the participation of Americo-Liberian elites in rubber production and offered agricultural advice to prospective farmers. Liberia’s former presidents, Charles King, Edwin Barclay, William Tubman and William Tolbert, all owned private rubber plantations.²⁶² During the Tubman presidency, the merging of political authority and the control of property rights reinforced patrimonial relationships as the president controlled the right to enclose communal land and transfer title deeds.²⁶³ According to George Klay Kieh, the Firestone project “occasioned the formation of a class system primarily wedded to the individual’s relationship to the major means of production”, which turned the neocolonial state into a vehicle for promoting the interests of the Americo-Liberian ruling class.²⁶⁴

²⁵⁷ Miller and Jones, “Chapter Two: A Century of Blood, Sweat and Profits.”

²⁵⁸ Ibid.

²⁵⁹ Munive, “A Political Economic History of the Liberian State,” 362.

²⁶⁰ United Nations Mission in Liberia, “Human Rights in Liberia’s Rubber Plantations: Tapping into the Future,” May 2006, <http://www.refworld.org/pdfid/473dade10.pdf>.

²⁶¹ Miller and Jones, “Chapter Two: A Century of Blood, Sweat and Profits”.

²⁶² Ibid.

²⁶³ Munive, “A Political Economic History of the Liberian State,” 364.

²⁶⁴ Kieh, *The First Liberian Civil War*, 52.

As Firestone's importance in Liberia grew, it became increasingly clear that "[w]hoever was going to run Liberia needed Firestone".²⁶⁵ However, when President Tolbert assumed the presidency in 1971, he renegotiated the concession agreement with FSTR to include higher taxes and the hiring of more Liberians in senior management positions in keeping with his efforts to "Liberianise" the economy.²⁶⁶ While the top financial and managerial positions remained the domain of the American staff, the company complained that the changes to the concession negatively affected its profit.²⁶⁷ However, Firestone's situation was eased in 1980 when Samuel Doe suspended the renegotiation of the concession. Doe also offered Firestone generous tax exemptions to lessen the negative consequences of the drop in the global price of rubber in 1982.²⁶⁸ In spite of these actions, the company's supply of rubber from private farms dropped dramatically in the 1980s and Firestone was forced to surrender its lease on its Cavalla plantation.²⁶⁹

However, Firestone was extended a lifeline with the rapid spread of HIV and Aids in the 1980s, which increased demand for condoms and other latex-based protective gear significantly. In response to increased global demand for latex, as well as remaining financial pressures, a new system was initiated at the Harbel plantation that allowed for latex to flow from the rubber tree for longer.²⁷⁰ This system decreased the frequency of tapping, leading the company to dismiss 5 000 of its workers to decrease costs and boost profitability. Firestone was still facing criticism for harsh working conditions at the plantation and the decision to reduce the labour force only exacerbated hostilities towards the company.²⁷¹ However, the increase in demand for latex helped to keep the company afloat and Firestone "ended the decade on a positive note".²⁷²

2.4. Section Summary

To protect its plantation in Liberia, Firestone sought to maintain good relations "with whoever ran Liberia, no matter how they came to power or what they did to hold on to

²⁶⁵ Doyle, "What Firestone did in Liberia for 'Profit, Profit, Profit.'"

²⁶⁶ TRC, *Volume II: Consolidated Final Report*, 110;

Tolbert in Hlophe quoted in Munive, "A Political Economic History of the Liberian State," 364.

²⁶⁷ TRC, *Volume II: Consolidated Final Report*, 110;

Dan Morgan, "Firestone Efficiency Overshadows Liberian Problems," *The Washington Post*, March 7, 1979, accessed November 3, 2018, https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1979/03/07/firestone-efficiency-shadows-liberian-problems/4c547e5e-b372-490a-a5c3-c19717206492/?utm_term=.d3bb26d326a1.

²⁶⁸ Miller and Jones, "Chapter Two: A Century of Blood, Sweat and Profits."

²⁶⁹ United Nations Mission in Liberia, "Human Rights in Liberia's Rubber Plantations," 21.

²⁷⁰ Rosenau et al., *Corporations and Counterinsurgency*, 20.

²⁷¹ Ibid.

²⁷² Ibid.

it”.²⁷³ This included the 30-year quasi-dictatorship of President Tubman, as well as President Doe.²⁷⁴ Similarly, each new regime remained aware of the significance of the revenues that accrued to government through the company’s payment of its rent, and through taxation and royalty payments.²⁷⁵ The significant investment made by the company is an important factor to consider when analysing BFS’s decision to support the collaboration between Firestone Liberia and Taylor’s government. Liberia’s historical economic context and Firestone’s position within it are thus important factors to understanding the company’s behaviour during the First Civil War.

Section 3 | Firestone and The Bridgestone Corporation

3.1. The Bridgestone Corporation Acquisition

The 1970s had been a difficult decade for Firestone’s parent company, the Firestone Tire and Rubber Company.²⁷⁶ In 1979, FSTR appointed its first “outsider” CEO, John Nevin, who was tasked with reinvigorating the company’s financial situation and maximising shareholder value.²⁷⁷ While Nevin executed his mandate successfully, the process involved closing several long-standing Firestone plants, which made him unpopular in the company’s home city of Akron.²⁷⁸ With the changes made by Nevin, what had begun as a family-style business in the early 1900s was much less so by the end of the 1970s and, in 1988, the decision was made to sell the Firestone Tire and Rubber Company to a Japanese conglomerate, the Bridgestone Corporation (“Bridgestone”). As part of its growth strategy, Bridgestone had already established its own North American manufacturing facility through the acquisition of one of FSTR’s tyre plants in Tennessee in 1983.²⁷⁹ However, America accounted for 45 per cent of global tyre sales in the 1980s and Bridgestone desired a larger stake in the US market.²⁸⁰ The Bridgestone Corporation bid US\$2.6 billion for complete ownership of all of FSTR’s

²⁷³ Miller and Jones, “Chapter Two: A Century of Blood, Sweat and Profits.”

²⁷⁴ Ibid.

²⁷⁵ Church, “The Firestone Rubber Plantations in Liberia,” 431.

²⁷⁶ Bridgestone Americas, Inc. “Corporation: History.”

²⁷⁷ Mackinnon, “Bridgestone’s Buy of Firestone.”

²⁷⁸ Ibid.

²⁷⁹ Wilson Kia Onn Wong, *Automotive Global Value Chain: The Rise of Mega Suppliers* (London and New York: Routledge, 2017).

²⁸⁰ Ibid.

market share and assets.²⁸¹ Firestone's board voted to advise the company's shareholders to accept the deal, which they did in April 1988.²⁸²

3.2. The Creation of Bridgestone/Firestone Incorporated

Bridgestone merged its US operations with FSTR to form the subsidiary, Bridgestone/Firestone Incorporated (BFS). FPCO changed to Firestone Liberia and remained under the control of its parent company, FSNR.²⁸³ Between 1989 and 1991, Bridgestone lost over US\$1 billion as a result of its FSTR acquisition.²⁸⁴ The condition of Firestone's plants and facilities was far worse than Bridgestone had anticipated and the parent company was forced to inject US\$1.4 billion into necessary upgrades. Moreover, the FSTR lost its contract to supply tyres to General Motors shortly after Bridgestone's acquisition.²⁸⁵ To deal with these losses, Bridgestone designed a new management structure for BFS that emphasised employee engagement. Part of this involved building a better relationship with the local union, the United Rubber Workers (URW).²⁸⁶

3.2.1. The Influence of Yoichiro Kaizaki

While Bridgestone was advocating improved employee and union engagement on the ground, top management was undergoing other changes. Yoichiro Kaizaki was appointed as the first Japanese head of BFS in 1991 and was well-known for his aggressive cost-cutting strategies and his ruthless termination of ailing Bridgestone divisions. At corporate headquarters, he was referred to as the "*ichiban*" (number one) tough member of Bridgestone's hierarchy²⁸⁷ and his business tactics reflected the anti-union sentiments of corporate America in the 1980s and 1990s.²⁸⁸ Kaizaki's assertive business approach paid off in terms of its subsidiary's profitability and, in 1992, the two companies were fully consolidated and headquarters were moved to Nashville,

²⁸¹ W. Carl Kester, *Japanese Takeovers: The Global Contest for Corporate Control* (Washington DC: Beard Books, 2003), 127.

²⁸² Mackinnon, "Bridgestone's Buy of Firestone."

²⁸³ Bridgestone/Firestone Inc. is now Bridgestone Americas, Inc. Bridgestone Americas, Inc. "Corporation: Subsidiaries and Business Units."

²⁸⁴ Tom Juravich and Kate Bronfenbrenner, "Out of the Ashes: The Steelworkers' Global Campaign at Bridgestone/Firestone," in *Multinational Companies and Global Human Resource Strategies*, ed. William N. Cooke (Westport, CT: Quorum Books, 2003), 251.

²⁸⁵ Wong, *Automotive Global Value Chain*.

²⁸⁶ Juravich and Bronfenbrenner, "Out of the Ashes," 252.

²⁸⁷ Ibid.

²⁸⁸ Ibid.

Tennessee.²⁸⁹ Kaizaki returned to Japan in 1993 to take the position of CEO of the Bridgestone Corporation, while Masatoshi Ono took over his position as the chairman and CEO of BFS.²⁹⁰ However, with BFS still US\$2 billion in debt, Kaizaki maintained a close watch over the company from Tokyo and soon instituted even harsher cost-cutting strategies.

Kaizaki's aggressive business tactics caused tension between BFS and the URW union. When he threatened to shut down one of Firestone's plants in 1993 unless labour costs were significantly decreased, the local union went on strike for two weeks. BFS's response, directed by Kaizaki from Japan, was aggressive. According to a former president of the URW:

They put up guns on top of buildings, sandbags around. I mean, here's a place where they're supposed to have this cooperative joint-venture type of a location, and one of the first things is they [have] armed people roaming around in the plant.²⁹¹

It soon became clear that BFS's strategies on the ground were not only independent of its broader business objectives and practices, but often contradictory to them.²⁹² By mid-1994, after months of back-and-forth demands, the company and the union reached an impasse.²⁹³ Approximately 4 000 BFS employees went on strike, but Kaizaki stood firm, asserting after 10 months of striking that, "even if 80 per cent of people resist me, I don't care".²⁹⁴ To deal with the break in its supply chain and the drop in productivity, BFS simply brought in replacement workers and imported stock from its Japanese operations to meet American demand.²⁹⁵ Through implementing these and various other measures, BFS was able to counteract the negative consequences of the strike. By 1996, the company was turning a profit of US\$285 million and accounted for almost a third of Bridgestone's operating profits and 43 per cent of its consolidated sales.²⁹⁶

Bridgestone/Firestone finally conceded to employee demands in 1996, after the URW merged with the United Steelworkers of America and its campaign against BFS (and its

²⁸⁹ Penenberg, *Blood Highways*.

²⁹⁰ Heinz Luegenbiehl and Rockwell Clancy, *Global Engineering Ethics* (Oxford: Butterworth-Heinemann, 2017), 54.

²⁹¹ Juravich and Bronfenbrenner, "Out of the Ashes," 252.

²⁹² Ibid.

²⁹³ Ibid., 255.

²⁹⁴ Penenberg, *Blood Highways*.

²⁹⁵ Juravich and Bronfenbrenner, "Out of the Ashes", 256.

²⁹⁶ Penenberg, *Blood Highways*.

parent Bridgestone) went global.²⁹⁷ The amplification of the visibility of the strike forced the company to act to protect its reputation and Bridgestone's market value. Bridgestone was forced to adopt similar strategies in 2000 following the recall of millions of its Firestone tyres after a number of fatal car accidents occurred in Ford Rangers fitted with the tyres. This led to a significant decline in the value of the company's shares and a US\$10 billion decrease in its cash reserves.²⁹⁸ To deal with the controversy, BFS compensated affected customers and used the media to reassure consumers of its commitment to quality and safety control. At the corporate level, Bridgestone CEO tried to turn attention away from itself by blaming Ford Motors for the accidents.²⁹⁹

In these instances, the Bridgestone Corporation stepped in to mitigate the negative effects on the company's market value and to reassure its shareholders. However, this only occurred once negative media coverage and public opinion threatened the corporation's image and reputation. By contrast, the Firestone Liberia debacle received almost no media coverage at the time. This could explain the absence of Bridgestone's influence on the strategy adopted by Firestone, which was driven predominantly from BFS with input from Firestone management.

3.3. Section Summary

The Firestone Liberia case only became controversial long after the conflict had ended due to the delayed emergence of certain primary resources. This, coupled with the complex organisational structure of the corporation, meant that much of the decision-making took place at the level of the subsidiary, Firestone, and its immediate parent, BFS. Understanding the agency available to company management at each level is an integral piece of the puzzle. The Firestone management team on the plantation was able to take immediate action when the conflict affected themselves, their families and the Liberian employees by temporarily ceasing operations and avoiding the areas where violence was most concentrated. However, Firestone Liberia ultimately relied on BFS to

²⁹⁷ Juravich and Bronfenbrenner, "Out of the Ashes."

²⁹⁸ Sheri L. Erickson et al., "Shareholder Value and Crisis Communication Patterns: An Analysis of the Ford and Firestone Tire Recall," *Academy of Strategic Management Journal*, vol. 16, no. 1 (2017), <https://www.abacademies.org/articles/shareholder-value-and-crisis-communication-patterns-an-analysis-of-the-ford-and-firestone-tire-recall-6521.html>.

²⁹⁹ James O'Rourke, "Bridgestone/Firestone, Inc. and Ford Motor Company: How a Product Safety Crisis Ended a Hundred-Year Relationship," *Corporate Reputation Review*, vol. 4, no. 3 (October 2001), DOI: 10.1057/palgrave.crr.1540147.

decide whom to evacuate and when, as well as when to return to Liberia and on what terms. In turn, BFS was constrained by financial issues at the time and by pressure to ape the successes of its parent company, the Bridgestone Corporation, following the complicated merging of North American operations. Thus, understanding Firestone's history in Liberia, as well as the dynamics of the broader corporate structure within which it sits, provides crucial context for analysis.

Section 4 | Chapter Summary

The First Liberian Civil War had its origins in the founding of Liberia by a foreign-minority elite who turned the state into an enterprise from which they could benefit while excluding the vast majority of the population from access to social, political and economic opportunities. From early on in its formation as a state, Liberian politicians and civilians alike engaged in predatory and selfish behaviour. Moreover, the pervasive reliance on the use of force to govern also created the widespread belief that the way to access power in Liberia was through violent usurpation followed by retributive acts of brutality. As mentioned, the violence that characterised the Liberian Civil War was particularly brutal and horrifying, and atrocities were committed by all actors involved.³⁰⁰ When fighting reached the plantation in June 1990, Firestone Liberia's employees found themselves engulfed in a conflict where acts of violence were pervasive and carried out by unpredictable recruits, many of whom were young boys under the influence of drugs and alcohol.³⁰¹

It is important to emphasise here that any foreign company operating in this environment faced the problem that all choices that involved remaining in Liberia would mean engaging with actors (be they politicians, civilians, foreigners, rebels, and so on) who were predominantly self-interested and morally corrupt. The decisions made by the company need to be understood within this context.

³⁰⁰ Ellis, "Liberia 1989–1994", 165.

³⁰¹ Taylor's Small Boys Unit. Gaviria, *Firestone and the Warlord*.

CHAPTER FOUR

The First Liberian Civil War began in 1989 with a rebel insurgency launched from neighbouring Ivory Coast and ended in 1997 with Charles Taylor's election as president. The conflict was characterised by extreme brutality and violence inflicted on and by a variety of actors, including rebels, government officials, foreign forces and civilians. By the time war broke out, Firestone Liberia had been operating its plantation in Harbel for almost 65 years. The company had become accustomed to navigating the country's often-tumultuous political terrain and had built successful relationships with successive Liberian presidents. The newly amalgamated Bridgestone/Firestone (BFS), located in faraway Ohio, was thus faced with the task of deciding the future of one of its overseas subsidiaries. BFS has received extensive criticism for the decisions it made during the First Liberian Civil War and, yet, no comprehensive analysis has been conducted on the events that unfolded in the early 1990s. This chapter makes use of primary resources to conduct an in-depth investigation into Firestone's actions and decisions in the context of the Liberian civil conflict. The company's actions are contextualised according to the trajectory of the conflict, as well as its relations with its parent company, BFS. While the chapter addresses the consequences of the company's actions, it also aims to provide insight into the possible reasons behind the decisions that were made. Essentially, the objective is to reveal the complexities inherent in the corporate-conflict nexus.

Section 1 | Firestone and the Conflict Trajectory

1.1. December 1989 – May 1990

1.1.1. Firestone and the Early Days of the Insurgency

On Christmas Eve in 1989, Charles Taylor led approximately 150 men into Liberia's northeast region. The insurgents launched their first attack in Nimba County in retaliation for President Doe's brutal attack on the county's Gio and Mano population.³⁰² In response, Doe sent troops from his Krahn-dominated AFL to Butuo, where they once again singled out Mano and Gio – this time for their perceived support of the Taylor invasion.³⁰³ The earliest incarnation of the conflict set the NPFL, predominantly of Gio

³⁰² Stephen Ellis, "Liberia 1989–1994: A Study of Ethnic and Spiritual Violence," 166.

³⁰³ Ellis, "Liberia 1989–1994," 167.

and Mano ethnicity, against the government's AFL, constituted primarily by Krahn.³⁰⁴ At the start of the NPFL insurgency, Doe appeared confident that his soldiers could contain the threat. However, Taylor's fast-expanding NPFL made swift progress, entering the Krahn ethnic group's heartland, Grand Gedeh County, in early 1990 and reaching the outskirts of Monrovia by the middle of the year.³⁰⁵ Doe responded to the growing threat by arming Krahn and Mandingo civilians to assist his military in attacking and killing hundreds of Gio and Mano living in Monrovia. As such, the conflict soon expanded beyond the military and political spheres to infiltrate broader Liberian society.³⁰⁶

As evidenced by Figure 2 below, the insurgency started some distance from the Firestone plantation, which is situated in Liberia's Margibi County.



Figure 2: Political map of Liberia, showing the location of the Firestone plantation

Source: <http://www.nationsonline.org/oneworld/map/liberia-map.htm>

³⁰⁴ Tuck, "Every Car or Moving Object Gone," 3.

³⁰⁵ Ellis, "Liberia 1989–1994," 167.

³⁰⁶ Ibid.

In an interview for the documentary *Firestone and the Warlord*, Elizabeth Blunt – then a reporter for BBC West Africa – recounted her visit to the Firestone plantation just after the 1989 insurgency. Of the plantation, Blunt notes, “[i]t was beautiful. It was green. It was peaceful”.³⁰⁷ While the hope was that the brewing conflict would not affect the plantation’s operations, workers or assets, Firestone plantation manager, Donald Ensminger, became increasingly aware that the future safety of the plantation and its employees could not be guaranteed.³⁰⁸ The company could not risk being unprepared for the potential damage that a violent conflict posed and, on 6 April 1990, Ensminger issued a notice to Firestone’s expatriate staff. In the note, he wrote that, as a consequence of the prevailing political instability and uncertainty, a plan was needed to prepare for a “worst-case scenario”.³⁰⁹ While it is unclear exactly what this scenario entailed, Ensminger’s letter contained instructions for Firestone’s 40 or so American and foreign employees to pack emergency bags and to put gas in their cars in preparation. It also identified an emergency assembly point. Ensminger specified that the existence of the note, as well as the information conveyed therein, was not to be disclosed to anyone who had not personally received the note themselves.³¹⁰ In May 1990, as the conflict drew nearer to the plantation, the family members of the expatriate employees were sent home.³¹¹ However, the expatriate staff remained and operations on the plantation continued.

Firestone’s Liberian workers were not included in and, consequently, not covered by management’s emergency plan of action. However, Ensminger did meet with a group of the company’s Liberian employees to inform them that the company was not equipped to protect them should the situation on the plantation deteriorate. While he assured the frightened staffers of his belief (whether portrayed or real) that the rebels would likely only use the plantation as a path towards the capital, he also warned them that Firestone was a foreign company and thus responsible primarily to its expatriate staff.³¹² By the middle of 1990, the NPFL rebels had advanced through much of the Liberian countryside using terror tactics to incite fear in those they encountered. Journalists present at the time speak of rebels “advancing with their AKs held above

³⁰⁷ Gavia, *Firestone and the Warlord*.

³⁰⁸ Ellis, “Liberia 1989–1994”;

Ensminger, diary entries.

³⁰⁹ T. Christian Miller and Jonathan Jones, “Chapter One: Warlord on the Rise,” in *Firestone and the Warlord*, November 18, 2014, accessed September 16, 2018, <https://www.propublica.org/article/firestone-and-the-warlord-chapter-1>.

³¹⁰ Ibid.

³¹¹ Ibid.

³¹² Ibid.

their heads, just firing randomly down the road” while “wearing fright wigs, ... shower caps and women’s dresses and bathrobes”.³¹³ The rebels were headed for the capital city and the Firestone plantation was on their path.

1.1.2. The Geo-political and Geo-economic Significance of the Firestone Plantation

From the sources available, the Firestone management team did seem to believe – or at least portray to believe – in the early stages of the insurgency that the rebels would simply “go around the plantation”.³¹⁴ However, as Figure 3 shows, the Firestone plantation’s proximity to the capital city, Monrovia, put it right on the NPFL’s warpath.



Figure 3: Firestone's Harbel plantation

Source: <https://www.propublica.org/article/firestone-and-the-warlord-chapter-6>

In addition to its geo-political significance, the plantation held geo-economic significance to the rebels. The Harbel plantation had the makings of a military base, firstly due to its expansive size and the cover provided by its trees. It was also located in

³¹³ Scott Stearns (Freelance Reporter, Liberia, 1990–92) and John lee Anderson, interview for Gaviria, *Firestone and the Warlord*.

³¹⁴ Steve Raimo interview for Gaviria, *Firestone and the Warlord*.

close proximity to the Port of Buchanan and to Roberts International Airport (informally known as Roberts Field or abbreviated to RIA).³¹⁵ The plantation also had good facilities and communications technology; it offered housing and clinics, and had supplies of food and fuel, which were scarce during the conflict. It also offered certain recreational luxuries, such as a nine-hole golf course and a clubhouse. These attributes would have made the plantation a tempting target for any armed faction.³¹⁶

1.2. The Events of June 1990

1.2.1. The AFL and NPFL Battle at the Firestone Plantation

Despite hopes that the plantation would be circumvented, the NPFL rebels arrived at the Harbel plantation on 5 June 1990.³¹⁷ The rebels first arrived in the vicinity of the Firestone factory compound (illustrated in Figure 3). That night, management sent most of the workers home and retained only a skeleton crew to work the nightshift. The following day workers were also sent home from the central office, located 1.6 kilometres (three miles) down from the factory.³¹⁸ By midday, Ensminger noted that the rebels had taken control of Area 45 (see Figure 3) – a zone critical to the plantation’s operations – and had begun to demand cars, petrol and money from management.³¹⁹ Around two o’clock that afternoon, Ensminger observed that the rebels had entered the plantation’s golf clubhouse (located in Area 44), demanding vehicles and taking with them handheld radios, bags of rice and petty cash. With the rebels moving swiftly through the plantation, management imposed a six o’clock curfew and informed all employees that there would be no work on 6 June.³²⁰

It at first appeared that the rebels did not intend to harm anyone present on the plantation. In fact, many of the Liberian workers celebrated the arrival of the NPFL troops, referring to them as freedom fighters and cheering them on.³²¹ Doe had become widely unpopular and many Liberians believed that Taylor’s rebellion signalled the end of a repressive and corrupt regime. However, the rebels’ behaviour on the plantation and their ruthless victimisation of Liberian workers quickly quelled such hopes. After a

³¹⁵ Gaviria, *Firestone and the Warlord*.

³¹⁶ Ibid.

³¹⁷ Ensminger, diary entries.

³¹⁸ Ibid.;

Miller and Jones, “Chapter One: Warlord on the Rise.”

³¹⁹ Ensminger, diary entries.

³²⁰ Ibid.

³²¹ Miller and Jones, “Chapter One: Warlord on the Rise.”

day on the plantation, NPFL troops initiated a campaign of violence; beating, robbing, shooting, detaining and publicly executing those Liberians they identified as being supporters of the Doe regime.³²² Four days after the arrival of the rebels, troops from Doe's AFL recaptured the plantation from the NPFL and pushed the rebels into the surrounding bushes. Once they had assumed control over the plantation, the government forces launched their own campaign of violence against those believed to be supporters or facilitators of the Taylor-led rebellion.³²³

The battle that continued between the AFL and the NPFL was particularly intense in Area 45 (see Figure 3), and many civilians were caught in the crossfire. By this stage, operations on the plantation had come to a standstill and Firestone's expatriate staff decided to seek refuge at Ensminger's home, House 53, in Area 42 (see Figure 3).³²⁴ Thousands of Firestone employees had already begun evacuating their homes and heading towards the Harbel Hills (shown in Figure 3) to escape the violence in Area 45. On the third day, approximately 2 000 workers arrived at House 53 in the hopes of finding refuge from the violence. However, they were given rice and told by Ensminger that management could not offer them protection from either the AFL or the NPFL.³²⁵ The management team had reached out to the heads of the factions on a number of occasions; however, these attempts had proven futile. On 13 June, Ensminger's diary entry speaks to the precarious situation that Firestone was in at the time. The entry reflects his concerns for his and the other expatriate staff's safety, the safety of their Liberian employees, the safety of their assets and the need to assess company risks versus losses in an increasingly unstable environment.³²⁶

After seven days of fighting, it remained unclear which force had control over the plantation. In his diary, Ensminger noted:

Very awkward and potentially dangerous for us, our people and our assets ...
Will there be confrontations? Who will control? How to deal with changing
hands/demands?³²⁷

³²² United Steelworkers of America. "Preliminary Report," 7.

³²³ Miller and Jones, "Chapter One: Warlord on the Rise."

³²⁴ Ensminger, diary entries.

³²⁵ Ibid.

³²⁶ Ibid.

³²⁷ Ibid.

According to Ensminger's diary and other witness accounts, these demands were typically made by drunken, armed and angry fighters.³²⁸ As such, many of them were acquiesced to through payments in cash or through the provision of food and equipment to ensure the safety of Firestone employees.³²⁹ With a violent battle being waged between AFL and NPFL, the situation on the plantation became increasingly precarious. However, the management team on the ground had received little in the form of guidance or communication from Bridgestone's regional corporate offices in Akron. Ensminger noted in his diary that communications between Firestone and its corporate offices had been unsatisfactory, given the circumstances.³³⁰ As far as public statements on the matter were concerned, BFS spokesman, Trevor Hoskins, had announced to the press in Akron that the intention was to keep operations running even with the presence of the rebels, whom he referred to as freedom fighters.³³¹ However, in the afternoon on 13 June, six NPFL fighters armed with a rocket-propelled grenade launcher confronted Ensminger to demand money. Years later, Ensminger maintained that, in spite of the incident, he continued to believe that the conflict was a "short-term event" and that it did not change his conviction that the NPFL had not arrived with the intention to destroy company property or harm employees. Regardless of the contentions of the Firestone management staff, the incident led BFS headquarters to recognise that the situation was no longer a case of protecting corporate interests, but a question of life itself. BFS management decided, with the assistance of the US Embassy in Monrovia, to evacuate its expatriate employees from Liberia on 14 June 1990.³³² BFS Chairman, George Aucott, asked that the company's employees keep their colleagues left in Liberia in their prayers.³³³

1.3. July 1990 – December 1991

1.3.1. The Increasing Complexities of the Conflict Theatre

By the middle of 1990, the NPFL had reached the outskirts of Monrovia and a Taylor victory appeared plausible. However, in July 1990, several hundred members of the NPFL broke away to form the Independent National Patriotic Front of Liberia (INPFL)

³²⁸ Miller and Jones, "Chapter One: Warlord on the Rise."

³²⁹ Ensminger, diary entries.

³³⁰ Ibid.

³³¹ United Steelworkers of America. "Preliminary Report," 6.

³³² Ibid.

³³³ Ibid., 7.

with Taylor's former NPFL training officer, Prince Yormie Johnson, at its helm.³³⁴ Johnson took with him many of the NPFL's most experienced fighters, including many of his Libyan-trained special commandos, leaving Taylor with a few trained fighters and thousands of civilians who had taken up arms with the NPFL as it travelled south.³³⁵ Although fewer in numbers, the soldiers in Johnson's INPFL were well-trained and better disciplined, and the split significantly weakened the NPFL in the short term. The emergence of two mutually antagonistic belligerents, the NPFL and the INPFL, diluted the immediate threat to the Liberian government and allowed it to stave off defeat in mid-1990.³³⁶ However, neighbouring states in the West African region had become increasingly concerned with the instability in Liberia.³³⁷ As such, ECOWAS dispatched a multilateral armed force known as the Economic Community of West African States Monitoring Group (ECOMOG) to Monrovia in August 1990.³³⁸ The arrival of ECOMOG introduced a further obstacle to Taylor's political aspirations and split the balance of power in the conflict between three competing factions, namely the INPFL, the NPFL and ECOMOG.

Despite the arrival of ECOMOG's 12 000-strong intervention force, the INPFL succeeded in capturing and killing Samuel Doe in September 1990.³³⁹ Towards the end of 1990, the INPFL held a small area of Monrovia while the rest of the capital remained largely under ECOMOG control.³⁴⁰ Most of Liberia, with the significant exception of the capital city, fell under Taylor's control.³⁴¹ The situation stabilised and ECOWAS established the Interim Government of National Unity (IGNU) in November 1990 with Amos Sawyer as Interim President.³⁴² While Taylor participated in three successive rounds of negotiations orchestrated by ECOMOG (November 1990, February 1991 and April 1991), these talks were unsuccessful as Taylor refused to recognise the authority of the IGNU.³⁴³ Instead, he established his own administrative headquarters in Gbarnga, in Bong County, with all the characteristics of a sovereign state.³⁴⁴ His government, the National Patriotic Reconstruction Assembly Government (NPRAG), organised elections

³³⁴ Reno, *Warlord Politics and African States*, 93.

³³⁵ Ibid.

³³⁶ Adam Lockyer, *Foreign Intervention, Warfare and Civil Wars: External Assistance and Belligerents' Choice of Strategy* (New York: Routledge, 2018).

³³⁷ Ellis, "Liberia 1989–1994," 167.

³³⁸ Reno, *Warlord Politics and African States*, 93.

³³⁹ Ibid.

³⁴⁰ Ellis, "Liberia 1989–1994," 169.

³⁴¹ Gavia, *Firestone and the Warlord*.

³⁴² Ellis, "Liberia 1989–1994," 170.

³⁴³ Comfort Ero, "ECOWAS and the Subregional Peacekeeping in Liberia," *The Journal of Humanitarian Assistance* (September 1995), <https://sites.tufts.edu/jha/archives/66>.

³⁴⁴ Ellis, "Liberia 1989–1994," 170.

and formed its own parliament.³⁴⁵ Taylor also set up ministries, introduced his own currency, opened a bank in Gbarnga headed by his brother, Gbatu Taylor, and encouraged foreign companies to continue with “business as usual” in his “Greater Liberia”.³⁴⁶ This effectively created a military stalemate in Liberia.

In addition to Taylor’s refusal to recognise the legitimacy of the IGNU, peace talks were complicated by the emergence of another military faction from Sierra Leone. The United Liberation Movement of Liberia for Democracy (ULIMO) included a number of former-AFL soldiers, as well as militarised civilians of mostly Krahn and Mandingo ethnicity. In early 1991, Taylor had initiated a campaign to destabilise Sierra Leone in punishment for its support of ECOMOG. In retaliation, the government of Sierra Leone sought the support of Liberian exiles to push back against the NPFL.³⁴⁷ With the backing of the Sierra Leonean government, ULIMO began partaking in anti-NPFL attacks, predominantly along the Liberia–Sierra Leone border as well as within Sierra Leone itself, against the pro-Taylor Revolutionary United Front (RUF).³⁴⁸ In spite of this further complication, ECOWAS continued to attempt to end the conflict through a negotiated settlement throughout 1991.³⁴⁹

1.3.2. Firestone Hedges its Bets

With conflict dynamics so complex, Firestone hired Gerald Padmore, a US-based Liberian-born attorney, to advise on and assist in the company’s return. As Padmore explained, Liberia at the time was divided between two competing centres of power, and “Firestone’s operations straddled the lines of control”.³⁵⁰ Before the civil war, Firestone’s rubber would be processed at the Harbel plantation and then transported to Monrovia’s Freeport for export. However, at the time, the IGNU (protected by ECOMOG forces) controlled the small district around Monrovia, including Freeport, while Taylor’s NPFL occupied most of the countryside, including Harbel and the Port of Buchanan.³⁵¹ Thus, at this stage in the conflict, Firestone hedged its bets by engaging (or at least trying to engage) with all relevant actors to the conflict. Following the June 1990

³⁴⁵ Waugh, *Charles Taylor and Liberia*.

³⁴⁶ Ellis, “Liberia 1989–1994,” 171.

³⁴⁷ Ibid., 170.

³⁴⁸ Ibid., 171.

³⁴⁹ Ero, “ECOWAS and the Subregional Peacekeeping in Liberia.”

³⁵⁰ T. Christian Miller and Jonathan Jones, “Chapter Three: Tough Talk in the Jungle,” in *Firestone and the Warlord*, November 18, 2014, accessed September 16, 2018, <https://www.propublica.org/article/firestone-and-the-warlord-chapter-3>.

³⁵¹ Cable, May 1991.

evacuation of its expatriate staff, the company settled any outstanding payments to the state as required by its concession agreement and made advance payments for withholding taxes and income taxes.³⁵² Ensminger also reached out to Taylor in October 1990 in the hopes of arranging a meeting between NPRAG, Firestone and BFS to discuss a visit to the plantation to assess the status of its assets and infrastructure.³⁵³ Ensminger emphasised that Firestone could not return and restart operations until he had “assurance that order would be restored to Liberia and that all employees and their dependents would be safe from physical harm”.³⁵⁴ In addition, Firestone stated it would not recognise the legitimacy of any authority so as to avoid “interfering in the internal affairs of Liberia”.³⁵⁵

Despite receiving no correspondence back from Taylor, BFS remained intent on restarting operations and sent a small team of Firestone managers, including Ensminger and Ken Gerhart, to Monrovia in early 1991.³⁵⁶ At this stage, the company continued to engage with all relevant actors in the conflict theatre, which included numerous correspondences with Taylor and a meeting with the leader of the INPFL, Prince Johnson.³⁵⁷ In addition, Firestone sent shipments of rice to both Taylor’s NPRAG and the IGNU between June 1990 and June 1993 to the sum of US\$1.2 million.³⁵⁸ The company thus continued to “pick all sides” at a time when it was not certain to whom victory would go, but perhaps focused disproportionately on connecting with Taylor, given the plantation’s location within NPFL territory. In April 1991, US Ambassador Peter Jon de Vos finally succeeded in securing Firestone a meeting with Taylor. De Vos – an apparent “proponent of Firestone and Taylor reaching an accommodation”³⁵⁹ – took Ensminger with him to the meeting. However, Ensminger remained determined not to recognise Taylor’s NPRAG, insisting that the company would only work with NPRAG once it had received “all the dues that a government should receive”.³⁶⁰ The meeting was thus unsuccessful for both parties. According to Ken Gerhart, the underlying problem was that Taylor wanted everything to be done his way, while Ensminger wanted it done

³⁵² Schremp, letter from John Schremp to Francis T. Karpeh, 7.

³⁵³ Ensminger, letter from Donald Ensminger to Charles Taylor, 1; Ensminger, “The Effect of the Liberian Civil War on the Firestone Plantations Company.”

³⁵⁴ Ibid., 3.

³⁵⁵ Ibid., 5.

³⁵⁶ Gaviria, *Firestone and the Warlord*.

³⁵⁷ United Steelworkers of America. “Preliminary Report,” 9.

³⁵⁸ Ibid., 12.

³⁵⁹ Miller and Jones, “Chapter Three: Tough Talk in the Jungle.”

³⁶⁰ Donald Ensminger quoted in Miller and Jones, “Chapter Three: Tough Talk in the Jungle.”

“Firestone’s way”.³⁶¹ Historically, the Firestone Tire and Rubber Company (Firestone’s parent company before the Bridgestone acquisition) had negotiated from a position of power relative to the Liberian state. At this stage in the conflict, Taylor’s power was expanding as he consolidated his control over most of the Liberian territory, and he was willing and able to wait until Firestone was prepared to operate on his terms.³⁶² By the middle of 1991, Ensminger and Taylor had reached an impasse.

Despite the April 1991 meeting, Firestone was facing increasing difficulties in trying to deal with both the IGNU and the NPFL. The US Embassy in Monrovia continued to encourage Firestone and the NPRAG to reach an accommodation to allow for operations on the plantation to restart, as continued inactivity at the plantation was benefitting no one.³⁶³ In response, BFS sent two of its corporate executives, John Schremp and Richard Stupp, to Liberia to meet with Taylor in July 1991 to broker a deal that would allow operations to restart. From its investigation, ProPublica claims that this meeting resulted in BFS committing to conduct its business only through NPFL territory and agreeing to recognise NPRAG as the legitimate government in Liberia.³⁶⁴ This is based on a letter sent by Schremp to the NPRAG Minister of Labour, in which he mentions “President Taylor”. However, the letter makes no mention of ceding to these demands, but rather focuses on NPRAG’s consent to allow Firestone management back onto the plantation and to assist in restarting operations.³⁶⁵

In spite of the agreement reached at the meeting, the company continued to face difficulties in restarting operations on the plantation due to renewed fighting and incidents of looting. A cable between the US Secretary of State and the US Embassy in Monrovia in August 1991 reported that Firestone was “reluctant to write off huge investments in Liberia but [was showing] increasing frustration over efforts to conduct business ‘by the book’”.³⁶⁶ Taylor’s influence reached its zenith in mid-1991 as he effectively controlled over 95 per cent of Liberia.³⁶⁷ This, along with the issue of the plantation falling within this territory, arguably made Taylor the most critical factor in deciding Firestone’s future in Liberia. While Schremp did meet with the IGNU following the July 1991 meeting, Amos Sawyer reportedly found Schremp to be elusive when

³⁶¹ Ken Gerhart interview for Gaviria, *Firestone and the Warlord*.

³⁶² Miller and Jones, “Chapter Three: Tough Talk in the Jungle.”

³⁶³ Cable, May 1991.

³⁶⁴ Miller and Jones, “Chapter Four: Deal with the Devil.”

³⁶⁵ Schremp, letter from John Schremp to N. Mornorkonmana, 1.

³⁶⁶ Cable, August 1991, 3.

³⁶⁷ Gerdes, *Civil War and State Formation*, 42.

questioned about Taylor. In a recent interview, Sawyer stated that “[the IGNU] knew that Firestone support could fuel the war”.³⁶⁸ Ensminger also found issue with the company’s decision to work with NPRAG and returned to Akron to meet with several senior BFS executives. He failed to impact the executives’ decision and, in October 1991, Ensminger accepted a buyout package in exchange for not publicising the company’s actions. He was later replaced by Don Weihe, a retired Firestone plantation boss and old acquaintance of Taylor’s from his years working alongside the AFL.³⁶⁹

Eventually, the BFS Board of Directors met on 17 December 1991 in Akron to discuss its options with regards to the Firestone plantation.³⁷⁰ Schremp presented the details of the July meeting and the subsequent difficulties to the company’s top executives and advised them that an accord had been reached between the different political factions in Liberia committing them to down their arms, open up roads and partake in the upcoming election process. He continued that, while the implementation of the accord had suffered some delays, its conditions were devised to create an “atmosphere conducive to the holding of free, fair, and democratic elections”³⁷¹ scheduled for October 1992.³⁷² As such, Schremp asserted that there was hope that the accord’s success would bring much needed stability and economic growth to the country.³⁷³

1.3.3. The Yamoussoukro IV Accord

The agreement to which Schremp referred in his presentation was the Yamoussoukro IV Accord. The accord had been approved by ECOWAS states in September 1991 and signed by the warring factions in October 1991.³⁷⁴ Several factors shed light on why Taylor agreed to enter into the negotiations that culminated in the signing of the Yamoussoukro IV Accord. Firstly, the arrival of ULIMO added another anti-NPFL faction to the conflict, exposing the NPFL to a second front and diminishing Taylor’s territorial control.³⁷⁵ In addition, following increasing international pressure, a number of Taylor’s

³⁶⁸ Amos Sawyer quoted in Miller and Jones, “Chapter Four: Deal with the Devil.”

³⁶⁹ Miller and Jones, “Chapter Four: Deal with the Devil.”

³⁷⁰ Gavia, *Firestone and the Warlord*.

³⁷¹ Conciliation Resources, “Accords of the Liberian Conflict,” http://www.c-r.org/downloads/Accord%2001_5Accords%20of%20the%20Liberian%20conflict_1996_ENG.pdf, 39.

³⁷² United Steelworkers of America. “Preliminary Report,” 24.

³⁷³ Schremp, letter from John Schremp to Charles Taylor.

³⁷⁴ René Valéry Monge, “Letter Dated 17 November 1992 From the Permanent Representative of Benin to the United Nations Addressed to the President of the Security Council” (letter, S/24815), *UN Peacemaker*. https://peacemaker.un.org/sites/peacemaker.un.org/files/LR_911030_FinalCommuniqueFourthMeetingECOWAS.pdf.

³⁷⁵ Waugh, *Charles Taylor and Liberia*.

francophone regional allies had agreed to partake in the peace process, while anglophone states took charge of peacekeeping duties.³⁷⁶ While the arrival of ULIMO negatively affected Taylor's position of power, the accord offered him the recognition that NPRAG was a government of a "sovereign" territory. For the IGNU, the accord offered the disarmament of warring factions and the deployment of ECOMOG forces throughout Liberia.³⁷⁷ In this context, the NPFL and the IGNU signed Yamoussoukro IV on 30 October 1991 under the supervision of ECOMOG.³⁷⁸

Three days after the December 1991 board meeting, Schremp delivered the outcome of the meeting to Taylor, noting the board's confirmation for Firestone to go ahead with the programme to restart operations at Harbel.³⁷⁹ The letter was addressed to "President Taylor" and confirmed BFS's commitment to exporting its product out of the NPFL-controlled Buchanan port. While the letter does not indicate the company's recognition of NPRAG as the sole authority in Liberia, the conditions of the agreement lent credence to his legitimacy. However, according to the Yamoussoukro IV Accord, Greater Liberia was recognised as a sovereign territory and his NPRAG as a legitimate government.

1.4. January 1992 – November 1992

1.4.1. Firestone's Agreement with NPRAG

Firestone Liberia signed a memorandum of understanding (MOU)³⁸⁰ with Charles Taylor's NPRAG in Gbarnga, Liberia in January 1992.³⁸¹ In May 1992, Yoichiro Kaizaki and other members of the BFS executive team met with NPRAG's acting Minister of Finance and Minister of Foreign Affairs to confirm the conditions of its agreement.³⁸² In the meeting's memorandum of discussion (MOD), Kaizaki conveyed his perception that the political situation in Liberia had stabilised and the company's belief that NPRAG would emerge victorious in the coming October elections.³⁸³ However, the fragile stability established by Yamoussoukro IV was not long-lived. Following the arrival of

³⁷⁶ Julius Mutwol, *Peace Agreements and Civil Wars in Africa: Insurgent Motivations, State Responses, and Third-Party Peacemaking in Liberia, Rwanda, and Sierra Leone* (New York: Cambria Press, 2009), 76.

³⁷⁷ Waugh, *Charles Taylor and Liberia*.

³⁷⁸ Monge, "Letter Dated 17 November 1992."

³⁷⁹ Schremp, letter from John Schremp to Charles Taylor, 1.

³⁸⁰ Memorandum of understanding.

³⁸¹ Memorandum of understanding.

³⁸² Memorandum of discussion, 1.

³⁸³ *Ibid.*, 11.

ULIMO in September 1991, ECOMOG erected a buffer zone along Liberia's western border with Sierra Leone and purportedly demilitarised the ULIMO enclave. However, ECOMOG allowed the faction to move freely into Liberia, thereby facilitating its surprise attacks on Taylor's NPFL.³⁸⁴ ULIMO soon gained control over the majority of the Bomi and Grand Cape Mount counties, which provided the faction with significant resources to finance their military campaigns.³⁸⁵ The growing presence of ULIMO and continued mistrust of ECOMOG led Taylor to push back against the deployment of peacekeeping troops in NPFL-controlled territory.³⁸⁶ ECOWAS responded to Taylor's violations by imposing comprehensive economic sanctions on NPFL-controlled territory in July 1992, a move that was endorsed five months later by the United Nations Security Council (UNSC).³⁸⁷

In spite of these events, Firestone upheld its contract with the NPFL, a decision for which it has faced much criticism. In the literature, the negative consequences of MNC activities in conflict zones are typically addressed under two headings: financial payments and logistical support.

1.4.1.1. Financial Transactions

1.4.1.1.1. Payments in Cash and Kind

One of the conditions stipulated in the Firestone-NPRAG agreement was that the company would:

within thirty days, make all necessary arrangements with the Ministry of Finance for settlement of present and future financial obligations.³⁸⁸

Firestone began making payments to Taylor's NPRAG in January 1992, as shown in internal corporate records.³⁸⁹ Between January 1992 and January 1993, Firestone made tax payments to NPRAG that totalled US\$2.35 million for line items including income and reconstruction taxes (US\$1 272 000), a social security pension scheme

³⁸⁴ Kofi Oteng Kufuor, "Developments in the Resolution of the Liberian Conflict," *American University International Law Review*, vol. 10, no. 1 (1996), 382, <http://digitalcommons.wcl.american.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1423&context=auilr>.

³⁸⁵ Waugh, *Charles Taylor and Liberia*.

³⁸⁶ United Steelworkers of America. "Preliminary," 24.

³⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 25.

³⁸⁸ Memorandum of understanding, 2.

³⁸⁹ Firestone Plantations Company, Schedule of Tax Payments to the NPRAG.

(US\$469 000), social security income schemes (US\$89 000), and land and rent duties (US\$535 000).³⁹⁰ Cash payments totalled US\$1 366 000, while payments in kind for items listed as “rice or equipment” total US\$998 000.³⁹¹ A Firestone 1992 production and shipping document also records that the company spent a total of US\$35 300 000 between June 1990 and February 1993 on rebuilding the plantation.³⁹² It is unclear whether this amount included the US\$2.35 million in tax payments, as the document attributes US\$23 million to “plantation rehabilitation, pensions and labour settlement, and humanitarian aid”³⁹³ and the remaining US\$12 300 000 to “misc [sic] obligations and expenses while awaiting return to operation”.³⁹⁴

Between 1990 and 1993, Firestone’s parent company, Bridgestone/Firestone, also reported spending over US\$1 million on “humanitarian rice” for which the company later submitted an insurance claim for reimbursement. According to the company, the majority of the food was given to company employees in connection with restarting business operations in Harbel.³⁹⁵ However, there were numerous reports that humanitarian aid was redirected to feed Taylor’s NPFL. Several months before the MOU was signed, a large ocean freighter leased by Firestone called the Harbel Tapper had arrived in Monrovia at the NPFL-controlled Buchanan port.³⁹⁶ The Harbel Tapper brought relief cargo from the US-based Liberian Committee for Relief, Resettlement and Reconstruction, as well as supplies needed to restart operations at the Harbel plantation.³⁹⁷ However, in order to secure the aid on delivery, the cargo’s arrival was coordinated with Isaac Mussah, the NPFL Chief of Staff. While the rice was intended for the employees on the Firestone plantation, the communication from the US Embassy notes that it was instead “donated” to the NPFL as “the price Firestone had to pay for Mussah’s cooperation”.³⁹⁸

Despite sanctions imposed against Taylor’s territory in July 1992, Firestone’s rubber exports were directed through NPFL-controlled Buchanan port.³⁹⁹ Weihe created a new system to ship Firestone’s latex from Buchanan allegedly to “avoid the interim

³⁹⁰ Ibid.

³⁹¹ Ibid.

³⁹² Ibid., 3.

³⁹³ Ibid.

³⁹⁴ Firestone Plantations Company, “1992 Production and Shipments.”

³⁹⁵ United Steelworkers of America, “Preliminary Report,” 12.

³⁹⁶ Cable, October 1991.

³⁹⁷ United Steelworkers of America. “Preliminary Report,” 11.

³⁹⁸ Cable, October 1991.

³⁹⁹ United Steelworkers of America. “Preliminary Report,” 24.

government's 25 per cent export earnings surrender requirement".⁴⁰⁰ The NPFL charged Firestone port fees of only 10 per cent, which not only saved the company money, but also "put cash into Taylor's hands".⁴⁰¹ In addition, in keeping with a decree made by Taylor on the pay structure of resource-extracting companies, Firestone paid workers half in US dollars and half in Liberian dollars according to an embassy cable in July 1992.⁴⁰² According to ProPublica, "as the U.S. dollars circulated, they helped provide Taylor's government with much needed liquid currency".⁴⁰³

1.4.1.1.2. The Procurement of Protection

Another significant condition of the MOU involved Firestone's procurement of protection from the NPFL through the implementation of a "plant protection force", for which the company reportedly paid US\$2 million annually. Taylor put Brigadier General Domingo Ramos in charge of protecting the plantation with the assistance of about 300 NPFL soldiers. In addition, he commanded Ramos to recover Firestone's looted machinery, equipment and vehicles.⁴⁰⁴ According to the United Steelworkers of America, this (along with other payments) provided Taylor with both the means and the motive to keep fighting in 1992.⁴⁰⁵ However, the situation to which Firestone management had been exposed was characterised by widespread violence committed by multiple, active warring factions.⁴⁰⁶ In addition, the use of drugs and alcohol by combatants of all factions was pervasive, which made their actions even more violent and unpredictable. While these payments might well have provided Taylor with the financial means and motive to avoid a negotiated settlement to the conflict, they were also likely necessary to ensure the protection of company employees and assets in a context of extreme volatility and violence. Firestone had already in mid-1990 complained that the Liberian government had failed to supply it with the security measures provided for in its concession agreement.⁴⁰⁷ It is necessary to consider that Firestone may have turned to the NPFL for protection, primarily because the plantation was located within

⁴⁰⁰ Cable, July 1992.

⁴⁰¹ T. Christian Miller and Jonathan Jones, "Chapter Five: Money and Menace," in *Firestone and the Warlord*, November 18, 2014, accessed September 16, 2018, <https://www.propublica.org/article/firestone-and-the-warlord-chapter-5>.

⁴⁰² Cable, July 1992, 4.

⁴⁰³ Miller and Jones, "Chapter Five: Money and Menace."

⁴⁰⁴ Miller and Jones, "Chapter Five: Money and Menace."

⁴⁰⁵ United Steelworkers of America. "Preliminary Report."

⁴⁰⁶ Foster et al., *A House with Two Rooms*, 156.

⁴⁰⁷ Enslinger, "The Effect of the Liberian Civil War on the Firestone Plantations Company," 2.

Taylorland, and secondly, because the government had failed to provide the level of protection required.

1.4.1.2. On-the-ground Operations

In October 1992, Weihe took the new US Ambassador to Liberia on a tour of the plantation. In a cable to the US State Department, the Ambassador noted that the plantation was at this stage “back in operation in a major way if not yet at full capacity” and employees appeared “well-fed and generally content”.⁴⁰⁸ In addition, he reported that the Firestone Hospital was operational again and that, although severely understaffed, it was providing necessary medical attention to Firestone employees and their dependents, as well as the Liberian population.⁴⁰⁹ According to the report, the NPFL had put up military barriers and checkpoints in the area, although intimidation tactics seemed to be “somewhat less extensive or intensive” under Domingo’s control.⁴¹⁰

However, another tour given by Weihe previously in June provided a less optimistic account of the goings-on on the plantation. The details of the visit were recounted in a cable and included concerns that:

[w]ithout elaborating, but giving the impression that there may be some military significance, [Weihe] mentioned that certain parts of the plantation were off-limits to non-NPFL.⁴¹¹

Taylor and his NPFL used these areas for private matters purportedly unknown to Firestone staff and employees. NPFL soldiers were also quartered on the plantation and given access to company vehicles. According to Taylor’s Minister of Defence, Jucontee T. Woewiyu, the General Manager’s house – known as Building 54 – was made available to Taylor to use as his “executive mansion”.⁴¹² Another facility – Building 53 – was converted by the NPFL into its radio station. According to Woewiyu, Firestone allowed the radio station because “it was information useful to everybody”.⁴¹³

⁴⁰⁸ Cable, October 1992.

⁴⁰⁹ Ibid.

⁴¹⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹¹ Cable, July 1992, 6.

⁴¹² United Steelworkers of America. “Preliminary Report,” 20.

⁴¹³ Pretrial examination of Woewiyu from United Steelworkers of America, “Preliminary Report,” 22.

Firestone was accused of facilitating the offensive launched by the NPFL in October 1992 by virtue of its decision to allow the NPFL onto the plantation and giving it access to crucial supplies. The offensive was named Operation Octopus, for Taylor's plan to attack the capital city from multiple directions, "enveloping it like the arms of an octopus".⁴¹⁴

According to the USWA, violent atrocities reached new heights during Operation Octopus and Firestone received serious criticism for supposedly "allowing" for this to happen.⁴¹⁵

1.4.1.2.1. Operation Octopus

The NPFL launched its surprise attack against ECOMOG forces in Monrovia in the early hours of 15 October 1992. Two attacks were launched from the Firestone plantation – one from the north and one from the east – with the objective of taking control of Monrovia's suburbs and the IGNU's last remaining airport.⁴¹⁶ In retaliation, ECOMOG launched a counterattack with the support of anti-Taylor factions and former AFL troops who knew the terrain well.⁴¹⁷ In November, ECOMOG went on the offensive, bombing known NPFL territories. The Firestone plantation was hit six times by ECOMOG Alpha jets on 2 November 1992, exacting a significant human cost.⁴¹⁸ The first bomb hit near the rubber processing plant, destroying houses and a soccer field, and killing 42 civilians.⁴¹⁹ Over the next few days, ECOMOG jets hit two Firestone garages, two crossroads on the plantation, the Duside Hospital and adjacent staff residences, and the rubber processing plant (directly this time – destroying parts of the block rubber and liquid rubber areas).⁴²⁰ Firestone management reported that no combatants were killed in the bombings, and that the victims of the ECOMOG attack were Firestone dependents and those seeking refuge from the attacks in Monrovia.⁴²¹

Following the carnage created by Operation Octopus, the Firestone plantation went into "stand-by mode" and the expatriate employees were evacuated for the second time on

⁴¹⁴ T. Christian Miller and Jonathan Jones, "Chapter Six: Raining Hell," in *Firestone and the Warlord*, November 18, 2014, accessed September 16, 2018, <https://www.propublica.org/article/firestone-and-the-warlord-chapter-6>.

⁴¹⁵ Ibid.

⁴¹⁶ Miller and Jones, "Chapter Six: Raining Hell."

⁴¹⁷ Ibid.

⁴¹⁸ United Steelworkers of America. "Preliminary Report," 28.

⁴¹⁹ Cable, November 1992.

⁴²⁰ Ibid., 3–4.

⁴²¹ Ibid., 4.

18 November 1992 at the behest of Kaizaki.⁴²² On leaving, Weihe sent a letter to Taylor wherein he noted Kaizaki's recognition of NPRAG's cooperation and assistance, and his desire that operations be restarted as soon as possible.⁴²³ The letter contained details of Firestone's plans for the plantation in the absence of the management team. This included Weihe's appointment of a stand-in CEO and Operations Manager, as well as his selection of managers to oversee personnel and protect assets in the various departments. He also noted that he had left instructions for ensuring the continuation of essential operations (including the hospital, the hydroelectric plant and the waterworks). In addition, he indicated that the plantation had sufficient rice to feed employees for the foreseeable future and that, once this had run out, employees stationed in Ivory Coast would take charge of restocking supplies.⁴²⁴ Weihe also requested that, "Brig. Gen. Domingo Ramos ... continue his outstanding work keeping the peace and protecting the assets of the plantation" and that NPRAG continue to provide security measures needed once operations had restarted.⁴²⁵

1.5. December 1992 – July 1997

1.5.1. ECOMOG Takes Control of the Plantation

In December 1992, while the plantation was in stand-by mode, BFS held a board meeting at which a "forward plan" for Firestone was discussed. The plan involved:

A continued presence on the Plantation using Liberian employees, continued attempts to reduce costs, and a return to operations as soon as safe.⁴²⁶

At the meeting, Schremp reportedly suggested selling the plantation, but Kaizaki remained intent on holding on to it in the hopes that operations would soon be restarted. However, the changing political and military situation in Liberia affected this "forward plan". In late February 1993, troops loyal to the IGNU recaptured the Firestone plantation from the NPFL and turned it over to ECOMOG.⁴²⁷ Once the NPFL lost control of the plantation, ECOMOG benefitted from tax payments for rubber exported from

⁴²² United Steelworkers of America. "Preliminary Report," 30.

⁴²³ Ibid., 31.

⁴²⁴ Ibid., 32.

⁴²⁵ Ibid., 31.

⁴²⁶ Ibid., 33.

⁴²⁷ Miller and Jones, "Chapter Six: Raining Hell."

Buchanan, while the Liberian government benefitted from taxes accrued through Freeport.⁴²⁸

In July 1993, the warring factions finally gave in to the increasing international pressure to cease hostilities while maintaining their occupied positions. A ceasefire was signed in Cotonou, Benin and provision was made for the establishment of a provisional government. A timeline was also established for elections to be held and ECOMOG remained in place as a monitoring force to oversee the process. However, following complaints over the impartiality of ECOMOG, the UN established the United Nations Observer Mission in Liberia (UNOMIL), which was tasked with reporting progress to the UN Secretary General.⁴²⁹

Amos Sawyer toured the Firestone plantation in March 1993 following the ECOMOG takeover and reported on his visit at a press conference in Monrovia. In the recording of the conference, Sawyer remarked that:

Firestone facilities had been an integral part of Mr. Taylor's war machine ... Firestone's communication system was at his disposal ... [t]hey were operating, if not in cooperation, surely side by side – reinforcing each other.⁴³⁰

Sawyer argued that the Firestone plantation had served as the NPFL's "command post and nerve centre"⁴³¹ for Operation Octopus and threatened the company with legal action for its alleged support of Taylor's NPRAG. The IGNU also sought financial restitution from Firestone as per its general policy for dealing with companies accused of engaging with Taylor.⁴³² However, in March 1994, a new transitional government was instated that contained representatives from all the warring factions, including NPRAG. As such, nothing came of Sawyer's legal threats to Firestone.⁴³³

1.5.2. The End of the First Civil War and Firestone's Return

The company reportedly kept a low profile over the next two years, maintaining a skeleton crew on the plantation to ensure the maintenance of its assets and

⁴²⁸ Rosenau et al., *Corporations and Counterinsurgency*, 23.

⁴²⁹ Ellis, "Liberia 1989–1994," 172.

⁴³⁰ United Steelworkers of America, "Preliminary Report," 34–36.

⁴³¹ Miller and Jones, "Chapter Six: Raining Hell."

⁴³² United Steelworkers of America, "Preliminary Report," 37.

⁴³³ Miller and Jones, "Chapter Six: Raining Hell."

infrastructure. During this period, the plantation continued to act as a battleground for the various factions as well as a place of refuge for many civilians.⁴³⁴ Between 1994 and 1996, several attempts to institute a peace agreement failed, largely due to Nigeria's refusal to agree to a deal that included Taylor.⁴³⁵ However, in 1996, the Nigerian President, Sani Abacha, and Charles Taylor suddenly reached an agreement. This was due in part to the military weakening of the NPFL as well as Abacha's desire for Nigeria to appear as a peacemaker in the wake of Ogoni activist Ken Saro-Wiwa's 1995 execution.⁴³⁶ On 19 July 1997, special elections were held with Taylor and his NPFL emerging victorious by a large majority, with speculation that this was because Liberians feared further violence if he lost.⁴³⁷ Firestone returned to Liberia in 1996 and invested approximately US\$146 million in repairing the damage done to its Harbel plantation. According to the company, production only returned to capacity in 2000.⁴³⁸

Section 2 | Analysis of the Case Study

2.1. The Consequences of Firestone's Actions

The primary accusations laid against Firestone include its financial payments to NPRAG, its decision to allow the NPFL to use the plantation and, more generally, that the company earned revenue in the midst of mass atrocities. The IGNU, ECOMOG and the United Steelworkers union all accused Firestone of being complicit in NPFL military affairs, asserting that the company had helped the NPFL build explosives and had provided them with ammunition for combat.⁴³⁹ Firestone firmly denied involvement in such activities. ECOMOG also reported unearthing mass graves on the plantation in 1993, which they believed to hold the victims of NPFL attacks.⁴⁴⁰ According to the ECOMOG commanders who made the discovery, the gravesite was located close to the Firestone factory, which would have made it hard to hide from company employees. However, with the periods of chaos that occurred at the plantation and the atrocities committed by various factions, it would have been difficult either to identify the victims found in the graves or to discern whether the graves were made when the plantation

⁴³⁴ Ibid.

⁴³⁵ Morten Bøås, "The Liberian Civil War: New War/Old War?" *Global Society*, vol. 19, no. 1 (2005), 82, DOI: 10.1080/1360082042000316059.

⁴³⁶ Ibid., 82.

⁴³⁷ Lee and Lee, *Human Rights and the Ethics of Globalisation*, 131.

⁴³⁸ Firestone Natural Rubber Company, "Our Positions: Liberian Civil War," accessed January 8, 2018, <https://www.firestonenaturalrubber.com/our-positions/liberian-civil-war/>.

⁴³⁹ United Steelworkers of America. "Preliminary Report," 23, 36.

⁴⁴⁰ Ibid.

was operational or on stand-by. Moreover, civilians and combatants alike often struggled to identify the factions to which fighters belonged and so it was often unclear who had committed which act of violence.⁴⁴¹ As with any conflict, it is difficult to ascertain the motives of any of the factions involved and thus it is not certain whether such allegations were factual, bombastic or untrue.

It is, however, difficult to ignore the key role that the plantation played in facilitating the NPFL's Operation Octopus. Additionally, the plantation did provide the NPFL with a well-functioning military base complete with housing, vehicles, food and communications technology. Once operations were restarted, the plantation itself also became a source of income for NPRAG. Taylor testified at his International Criminal Court (ICC) trial that once the plantation fell into NPFL control, "it became at that particular time [the NPFL's] most significant principal source of foreign exchange".⁴⁴² Taylor revealed that the NPFL could make between US\$1 million and US\$2 million every two quarters, depending on rubber sales from the plantation.⁴⁴³ While he was reportedly earning as much as US\$75 million per annum by 1996 (on top of support received from sympathetic states such as Burkina Faso and Libya), this was a significant sum for Taylor in the early days of the conflict.⁴⁴⁴ While on trial for war crimes at The Hague, Taylor explained the particular significance of his collaboration with Firestone in the early 1990s.

DEFENCE ATTORNEY: Now, Harbel is the location for what economic activity?

CHARLES TAYLOR: Harbel is the location of the Firestone rubber plantation.

DEFENCE ATTORNEY: And what was the significance of capturing that?

CHARLES TAYLOR: Oh, you had immediately a means that would provide the financial assistance that we needed for the revolution.⁴⁴⁵

In addition to offering on-the-ground support, Firestone was accused of helping to finance Taylor's military campaigns in the early 1990s. The payments made by Firestone

⁴⁴¹ Foster et al., *A House with Two Rooms*, 111.

⁴⁴² "Hearing of Dankpannah Dr Charles Ghankay Taylor, August 27, 2009" (transcripts of the ICC trial of Charles Taylor), *Sayit*, <https://charles-taylor.sayit.mysociety.org/hearing-27-august-2009/dankpannah-dr-charles-ghankay-taylor>.

⁴⁴³ "Hearing of Dankpannah Dr Charles Ghankay Taylor, August 27, 2009."

⁴⁴⁴ Miller and Jones, "Chapter Five: Money and Menace."

⁴⁴⁵ Gaviria, *Firestone and the Warlord*.

in cash and in kind undeniably contributed towards the NPFL's military capabilities and Taylor's ability to withstand pressure from the IGNU and ECOWAS states.⁴⁴⁶ The United Steelworkers of America was particularly critical of Firestone's actions during the first civil war. The union's 1996 report argued that:

Bridgestone/Firestone's agreement to do business with ... Charles Taylor indirectly and perhaps directly contributed to mass death and destruction in Liberia, and prolonged the civil war by providing Taylor with badly needed revenue and a base of operations.⁴⁴⁷

However, the union was engaged in an intense contractual dispute with BFS in the US at the time. As such, the United Steelworkers of America investigated the situation in Liberia with the intention of using what it uncovered as leverage in its contract negotiations with Firestone.⁴⁴⁸ When BFS acquiesced to the union's demands, the report was hidden and only became public two decades later.⁴⁴⁹ While this does not absolve Firestone, it is important to understand the context in which the allegations against the company were made.

Finally, Firestone was also accused of simply continuing operations while bearing witness to the atrocities being committed around them. During Operation Octopus, production on the plantation reached its 1992 record (a total of 4.7 million pounds of rubber), earning Firestone further criticism.⁴⁵⁰ Members of Firestone staff did admit that they noticed something unusual taking place at the time; however, many qualified this by asserting that the tall trees on the plantation mostly restricted their vision.⁴⁵¹ Weihe also insisted he did not know Taylor was planning an attack; however, his statement that "[the NPFL] used the plantation to, more or less, regroup, and go down to Schieffelin"⁴⁵² suggest otherwise.⁴⁵³ Moreover, his close personal relationship with Taylor might have made him more likely to turn a blind eye to happenings on the plantation. While it is difficult to accept that management was completely oblivious to

⁴⁴⁶ United Steelworkers of America. "Preliminary Report," 30.

⁴⁴⁷ Ibid., 3.

⁴⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁴⁹ T. Christian Miller, "Union Buried Evidence of Firestone Support of Warlord After Labor Deal," *ProPublica*, March 12, 2015, accessed September 2, 2018, <https://www.propublica.org/article/union-buried-evidence-of-firestone-support-of-warlord-after-labor-deal>;

Firestone Plantations Company, Schedule of Tax Payments, 1.

⁴⁵¹ Brad Pettit's interview for Gaviria, *Firestone and the Warlord*.

⁴⁵² Schieffelin is a military base between Firestone and Monrovia. Miller and Jones, "Chapter Five: Money and Menace."

⁴⁵³ Miller and Jones, "Chapter Five: Money and Menace."

all the goings-on, it is impossible to know for certain which Firestone employees were privy to Taylor's plans, if any at all. This said, even if management had their suspicions or prior knowledge, the company was bargaining from a position of weakness and its options were limited. Without support from its home government in the US and unable to rely on the IGNU, what Firestone management could actually have done at the time is questionable.

Essentially, Firestone's agreement with NPRAG did provide Taylor with at least some of the financial and logistical support he needed to continue in his campaign to capture the capital and the presidency. While many of the accusations made are well-founded, the consequences of Firestone's decisions cannot be analysed in isolation from the array of options available to the company. The following section uses a letter written by Schremp to unpack the possible motivations behind the 1992 agreement. The aim is to try to understand the degree of agency available to the company within the context of the conflict and to assess the choices it made against any realistic alternatives.

2.2. The Possible Motivation for Firestone's Actions

2.1.1. "Profit, Profit, Profit"⁴⁵⁴

At the end of June 1993, the IGNU Minister of Finance and Minister of Justice sent a joint letter to Schremp questioning Firestone's actions in Liberia from 1991 and its relationship with NPRAG/NPFL, in particular.⁴⁵⁵ The next month, BFS executive Schremp responded to Sawyer's accusations in a letter sent to the IGNU Finance Minister.⁴⁵⁶ Schremp gave three primary justifications for Firestone's return to Liberia: concern for the company's Liberian workers, the need to protect its assets and the promise of stability offered by the Yamoussoukro IV Accord.⁴⁵⁷ A number of contributions to the debate argue or insinuate that the overwhelming motivation for returning to Liberia and restarting operations was to do with profit.⁴⁵⁸ However, Firestone reported profits of approximately US\$16 million in 1989, the year before the

⁴⁵⁴ Edwin Cisco (Firestone Workers Union) interview for Gaviria, *Firestone and the Warlord*.

⁴⁵⁵ Schremp, letter from John Schremp to Francis T. Karpe, 1.

⁴⁵⁶ Miller and Jones, "Chapter Six: Raining Hell."

⁴⁵⁷ United Steelworkers of America, "Preliminary Report," 38–40.

⁴⁵⁸ Miller and Jones, "Chapter Four: Deal with the Devil";

Doyle, "What Firestone did in Liberia for 'Profit, Profit, Profit,'";

DeFotis, "Investing in Africa";

Genzlinger, "Bodies Pile Up, but Business Goes On."

conflict started.⁴⁵⁹ In comparison, Schremp's letter noted that the company's profits between 1991 and the end of 1992 amounted to just US\$1.1 million.⁴⁶⁰ The debt increase for the company over the period June 1990 to February 1993 was over US\$35 million, with US\$12 million of this spent on "miscellaneous obligations and expenses while awaiting return to operation" and US\$23 million for "plant rehabilitation, pensions and labour settlement, and humanitarian aid".⁴⁶¹ In addition to this, US\$16 500 000 was attributed to the damage to and loss of property, which brought the amount to a total exceeding US\$50 million.⁴⁶² Thus, it would be difficult to argue that the conflict offered Firestone a more lucrative opportunity to generate profit than in times of peace.

2.1.2. Protecting the Future of its Investment

A more likely explanation for BFS's decision was its concern for the state of its investment and the fragility of its assets located in Liberia. The plantation itself (including the rubber trees, the buildings and factories, and the vehicles and equipment) was only estimated to be worth around US\$200 million at the time. For the Bridgestone Corporation, a loss of US\$ 200 million would not have had any serious implications for the parent company's long-term financial health. Moreover, its shareholders would have not have suffered losses beyond the amount of their original investment due to the protection of limited liability. However, the plantation brought in decent revenue for the FSTR and BFS surely hoped it would continue in this stream. In the late 1980s, around the time of Bridgestone Corporation's acquisition of FSTR, the Liberian plantation was supplying around 40 per cent of the latex consumed in the US.⁴⁶³

In addition, its primary assets – the rubber trees – were fragile and required constant attention. A single rubber tree takes approximately six years to reach maturity, at which time it is carefully drained and then left to renew its supply before being tapped again.⁴⁶⁴ A group of Liberian managers had remained behind to keep the plantation

⁴⁵⁹ Miller and Jones, "Chapter Three: Tough Talk in the Jungle"; Michael Kourabas, "How Firestone Buoyed the Rise of Convicted War Criminal Charles Taylor," *Triple Pundit*, November 21, 2014, accessed November 2, 2018, <https://www.triplepundit.com/2014/11/firestone-buoyed-rise-convicted-war-criminal-charles-taylor/>.

⁴⁶⁰ Schremp, letter from John Schremp to Francis T. Karpeh.

⁴⁶¹ Firestone Plantations Company, "1992 Production and Shipments," 3.

⁴⁶² Ibid.

⁴⁶³ Gaviria, *Firestone and the Warlord*.

⁴⁶⁴ Patricia Levy and Michael Spilling, *Cultures of the World: Liberia* (New York: Marshall Cavendish, 2008), 17.

operational; however, the small team had been unable to properly maintain all the rubber trees that covered the large 200 square mile (518 square kilometre) area.⁴⁶⁵ In addition, Schremp's letter noted that Firestone had received reports of rebels and civilians "slaughter-tapping"⁴⁶⁶ the plantation trees to illegally harvest its latex for profit.⁴⁶⁷ Like many other resource-reliant MNCs, Firestone Liberia's assets were immobile. On this issue, then US Ambassador Herman J. Cohen argued:

You can't close down a plantation. You can't wrap up, you know, five million trees and take them away. So you want to preserve what you can, and so you have to make deals.⁴⁶⁸

2.1.3. Protecting its Liberian Employees

While it could be argued that BFS was primarily motivated by the desire to protect its investment and perhaps to generate some revenue in the midst of a dire financial period, other motivations also warrant consideration. In his letter to the IGNU, Schremp asserted that Firestone "received regular entreaties from employees and their families and dependents asking [Firestone] to return in order to alleviate their hardship".⁴⁶⁹ BFS attorney, Gerald Padmore, argued that the company's desire to return to the plantation was driven primarily by a concern for its employees and that the "easy answer" for Firestone would have been to abandon the plantation.⁴⁷⁰ Moreover, the management team of Firestone had been working with their Liberian colleagues on a daily basis for years and it would be fair to assume there was a degree of concern for their wellbeing. The Firestone management team on the ground had witnessed an episode of the conflict in June 1990 and were aware, at least to an extent, of the levels of brutality and violence occurring. Moreover, Schremp's letter argued that the plantation needed income to cover expenditures such as rice and medicine for those in need, which meant that operations would have to restart.⁴⁷¹

⁴⁶⁵ Rosenau et al., *Corporations and Counterinsurgency*, 19.

⁴⁶⁶ This is "an industry term for extracting so much sap that the tree dies". Miller and Jones, "Chapter Three: Tough Talk in the Jungle."

⁴⁶⁷ Miller and Jones, "Chapter Three: Tough Talk in the Jungle."

⁴⁶⁸ Herman Cohen (US Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs in the early years of the civil war) interview for Gaviria, *Firestone and the Warlord*.

⁴⁶⁹ Schremp, letter from John Schremp to Francis T. Karpeh, 2.

⁴⁷⁰ Miller and Jones, "Chapter Three: Tough Talk in the Jungle."

⁴⁷¹ Schremp, letter from John Schremp to Francis T. Karpeh.

2.1.4. The Assurance of Yamoussoukro IV

Schremp's letter also argued that the Yamoussoukro IV Accord recognised that "both the Interim Government and the NPRAG would continue to administer territory under their respective control pending elections later in 1992".⁴⁷² According to Schremp, this was an indication that the conflict was drawing to a close. Moreover, he argued that, in entering into its MOU with the NPFL, "Firestone did not escape its obligations but, under a situation of force majeure, had to accept more onerous ones".⁴⁷³ This likely referred to both the heavy financial burden of the agreement as well as the restrictive environment created by NPFL control of the plantation. According to Schremp, the company had no interest in supporting the NPFL or any other military or political entity and had no prior knowledge of the NPFL's (or any other faction's) plans. The letter specified that peace was always preferable for the company and that Firestone's "own economic objectives in Liberia [could] only be advanced under these [peaceful] conditions".⁴⁷⁴ The letter concluded with the conviction that Firestone should not be punished for events that were beyond its control and that the company had acted reasonably given the circumstances to protect its assets and employees.⁴⁷⁵

Section 3 | Chapter Summary

When assessing the evidence, it is difficult to conclude that the agreement with Taylor arose of a belief that the deal would be financially lucrative. Rather, it would seem that the underlying motives were protecting the plantation's assets and its Liberian employees (even if to a lesser extent). By the end of 1991, the plantation was located squarely within NPFL territory and Taylor was in a powerful bargaining position. BFS found itself negotiating with Taylor's NPRAG from a position of weakness as a result of the dangers facing its Liberian employees as well as its not easily replaceable assets. The levels of brutality and the shocking nature of the conflict made Firestone employees and assets extremely vulnerable and constrained the company's agency to withstand the NPFL. Moreover, the inability of the state to provide security and the unwillingness of the US government to offer protection limited the company's choices significantly; this, coupled with the unpredictability of the armed actors in the conflict (and child soldiers particularly), made procuring protection all the more necessary. As Firestone had no

⁴⁷² Ibid., 2–3.

⁴⁷³ Ibid., 3.

⁴⁷⁴ Schremp, letter from John Schremp to Francis T. Karpeh, 3.

⁴⁷⁵ Ibid., 5.

means to protect itself in such an environment, the NPFL was perhaps its best option for ensuring that operations could continue in a relatively safe environment. Over and above these factors, the Yamoussoukro IV recognised NPRAG as a government of a “sovereign” territory.⁴⁷⁶ Given Taylor’s power in comparison to the IGNU, BFS remained confident that the NPFL would win the civil war and that NPRAG would assume control over Liberia in its entirety.⁴⁷⁷ As such, developing a relationship with Taylor would have been increasingly important if the Firestone were to continue operating in Liberia in the future.

Another significant issue revealed through this study is the influence of geo-political and geo-economic variables on the agency of corporate actors. The existing literature on the role of MNCs in conflict does not sufficiently address the role of economic resources and geopolitics in defining the role played by MNCs in conflict zones. This in spite of the fairly broad acknowledgment that resource-reliant MNCs often elect to continue operating despite the instability wrought by civil war. The Firestone case study reveals the importance of geopolitics and the availability of resources in determining whether a company might become a target in the conflict. The revenue brought in through the export of rubber from the plantation made it “an engine for wealth creation”⁴⁷⁸ for NPRAG and the resources available became essential to NPFL operations in the early 1990s (and Operation Octopus in particular). Moreover, the plantation’s proximity to Monrovia put a red target on Firestone Liberia. Due to the immobility of its key asset, its rubber trees, the company found itself bound to a particular geographic site that also happened to be an attractive target during the conflict.

Ultimately, more recognition needs to be afforded to the way in which these factors constrain the agency of foreign business actors and influence decision-making in conflict situations. With these points in mind, the following chapter provides a summary of findings and addresses the consequences of these for further research on the topic.

⁴⁷⁶ Waugh, *Charles Taylor and Liberia*.

⁴⁷⁷ Schremp, letter from John Schremp to N. Mornorkonmana.

⁴⁷⁸ Rosenau et al., *Corporations and Counterinsurgency*, 23.

CHAPTER FIVE

5.1. Concluding Remarks

This thesis was an investigation of the possible motivations behind a company's decision to adopt strategies that might impact conflict dynamics. It investigated the role played by Firestone Liberia and its parent company, Bridgestone/Firestone, Inc. in the First Liberian Civil War. Analysis shows that activities involving payments in cash and kind and on-the-ground support did have negative consequences for conflict dynamics by providing Taylor (at least to an extent) with the means to withstand pressure from ECOMOG, the IGNU and other armed factions in the early 1990s. However, the existing literature neglects the influence of some key factors in analysing not only the Firestone Liberia case, but also the corporate–conflict nexus more broadly. These factors include geo-political and geo-economic characteristics, corporate structure, and the characteristics of the conflict itself.

Due to the geo-political and geo-economic significance of its Harbel plantation, Firestone Liberia was unwillingly drawn into the conflict dynamics of the First Liberian Civil War and faced with two dilemmas. The first dilemma was whether to cease operations and withdraw or to continue operating in spite of the surrounding conflict. However, both options – to stay or to go – were poisoned, meaning that either would have earned the company criticism. Withdrawing would have meant a loss of influence on the future of those assets and employees left behind in a conflict defined by shocking levels of violence. Alternatively, returning to the conflict meant engaging with actor(s) involved in the conflict, thus contributing towards conflict dynamics. The extreme brutality that defined the Liberian Civil War meant that the company would need to procure protection to insulate it and its employees from violence. Ultimately, Firestone was left with two options, neither of which was desirable: either go and leave the rest to suffer, or return and engage with conflict actors to ensure stability on the plantation.

Its fears supposedly assuaged by the promise of Yamoussoukro IV (as well as other factors previously discussed), Firestone Liberia returned to Liberia under the instruction of its parent company. On its return, Firestone was faced with a second dilemma: deciding which actors to engage with. At first, the company attempted to

remain neutral by “picking all sides”.⁴⁷⁹ However, by this stage in the conflict, the plantation was situated squarely within Taylor’s Greater Liberia. Now faced with the reality of a “peculiarly horrible”⁴⁸⁰ conflict, there was little option but to acquiesce to Taylor’s demands in order to restore some degree of stability to the plantation. Again, this decision earned Firestone Liberia considerable criticism, first from the IGNU and ECOMOG and later from the media more broadly. The predominant narrative in the literature is that ECOMOG (and the IGNU, by association) represented a force of “good” while Taylor’s NPFL epitomised the “bad”. In reality, though, all factions (including state soldiers) committed atrocities during the conflict.⁴⁸¹ While Firestone was heavily criticised for its decision to deal with Taylor, there was no guarantee which faction would have been the “good” choice for matters of business – if one existed at all. Every deal would have been with a “devil”.

The abovementioned factors constrained Firestone Liberia’s agency in responding to the Liberian Civil War. This is not to say that Firestone or BFS ought to be commended for their efforts, but rather that the company likely did what it thought was best in a bad situation. Moreover, just as the line between “good” and “bad” conflict actors is often blurred, so too are the implications of corporate behaviour. The resources and geo-political site of the Firestone plantation inevitably put it on the NPFL’s warpath. Thus, it would have been a target regardless of whether Firestone management was absent or present. This is enforced by the NPFL’s presence on the plantation after the first evacuation of the expatriate staff and its continued presence on management’s return. By returning to Liberia, Firestone was able to at least wield a degree of influence in safeguarding its assets, in providing necessary protection, food and medical care to employees and civilians on the plantation, and in generating some income to cover gross debts incurred as a result of the conflict.

In addition, as rubber trees are fragile and immobile, abandoning the plantation for the duration of the civil war would have likely led to the complete destruction of its most vital asset. This would have made restarting operations after the war an even more costly endeavour, potentially leading BFS to shut down the plantation. Firestone was and remains to this day Liberia’s most significant private employer. As such, closing down the plantation would have had a very negative impact on employment in Liberia

⁴⁷⁹ Rosenau et al., *Corporations and Counterinsurgency*.

⁴⁸⁰ Ellis, “Liberia 1989–1994,” 165.

⁴⁸¹ Miller and Jones, “Chapter Three: Tough Talk in the Jungle.”

and, consequently, on its economy. This would also have had an impact on post-conflict reconstruction and development in Liberia, as Firestone invested over US\$135 million in rebuilding homes, healthcare facilities, schools and other infrastructure, in addition to repairing the damage to the plantation after the conflict.⁴⁸²

While none of this negates or mitigates the negative consequences of Firestone Liberia's strategy, it does provide insight into the complex reality of the corporate–conflict nexus.

5.2. Future Research

The secondary aim of this study was to address the consequences of the findings on monitoring the role of corporate actors in conflict zones. In so far as monitoring corporate behaviour is concerned, company shareholders could be a potential mechanism to influence “good” corporate behaviour in conflict zones. In a publicly held company like the Bridgestone Corporation, shareholders do not officially own or run the company, nor are they liable for risks incurred, monetary damages imposed or harm caused by a subsidiary beyond the scope of their individual investment.⁴⁸³ However, the power of the shareholders of a publicly listed company lies in their ability to dump their shares, causing the company's market value to drop.⁴⁸⁴ As such, shareholders constitute a market force that can influence the decisions made by the company's directors. In particular, majority shareholders or holders of large blocks of shares can have a more direct influence through such means as board elections, for example.⁴⁸⁵ To prevent shareholders from divesting, a company's executive will often act to keep investors happy. As engaging in conflict dynamics can lead to negative publicity for an MNC, shareholder accountability might thus be a possible mechanism for inducing “good” corporate behaviour in such situations.

However, in a complex organisational structure, shareholders are typically far removed from the goings-on of various subsidiaries. Unless media coverage of a situation is extensive, geographic distance and the convolution of command in the corporate structure typically mean that shareholders as well as the ultimate holding company are not involved in issues relating to subsidiaries. In the case of Firestone Liberia, there was no significant coverage of Firestone's presence in Liberia at the time of the conflict.

⁴⁸² Firestone Natural Rubber Company, “Home.”

⁴⁸³ Ruggie, “Multinationals as Global Institution,” 4.

⁴⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 13.

⁴⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

Moreover, the “worst-case scenario” (that is, the loss of the worth of the company) would not have significantly impacted Bridgestone or its investors. As such, shareholders as a mechanism for corporate accountability would not have been useful in this situation. However, further research on the potential of shareholder accountability in regulating corporate behaviour is still warranted given the diverse nature of the cases that characterise the corporate-conflict nexus.

With regards to the broader issue of MNC behaviour in contemporary conflict, the current trend in the literature is to reprimand MNCs for exacerbating conflicts while simultaneously calling on them to contribute to their prevention and resolution.⁴⁸⁶ However, the findings of this study indicate that the dynamics of the corporate-conflict nexus are infinitely complex, and more low-n studies that account for intervening factors are needed to generate a working framework for positive corporate engagement. The role of geo-political and geo-economic factors needs to be accounted for, as do the particular characteristics of the conflict itself. Moreover, further research needs to approach these cases by recognising that a company’s decisions and actions are affected by conflict dynamics, just as conflict dynamics affect the risks and roles of the company.

This study sought to show that a better understanding of the motivations behind corporate behaviour is needed first in order to conceptualise an operational framework for proactive corporate engagement in conflict zones. It began by noting that the existing principles that dictate “good” corporate behaviour in conflict zones are inadequate as they are “declaratory rather than operational”.⁴⁸⁷ It thus concludes that any mechanisms for monitoring corporate behavior and ensuring good business practices need to account for the limited agency of many foreign business actors in conflict situations. It is hoped that this study will inform this process by providing a foundation for future research.

⁴⁸⁶ Berman, “Boardrooms and Bombs.”

⁴⁸⁷ Wennmann, “The Political Economy of Conflict Financing,” 435.

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APPENDICES⁴⁸⁸

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2. Memorandum of discussion, May 22, 1992.
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⁴⁸⁸ Sources are listed in the order in which they are introduced and discussed in the text.